

SMITHES: Creating a commercial success

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he and his wife have five kids and live in Barrington Hills. Tim, 41, is the vice president of sales; he and his wife have four kids and live in Winnetka. And Mark, 40, is Smithe's general counsel; he and his partner live in Lincoln Park with Petey, a 4-year-old bulldog.

The brothers spend most of their time in the company's Itasca headquarters, which also serves as a warehouse, customer service center and point of departure for the fleet of Smithe trucks. But they still manage to get out to their stores about once a week, touching base with their employees, surprising customers or hosting events such as book signings or wine tastings.

The Smithe boys started out in a tiny ranch house in Des Plaines, the children of Walter Jr. and Florence. In the late '60s, the growing family — there are also four sisters, Cindy, Margie and twins Hope and Amy, none of whom is involved in the family business — moved to a slightly larger home in Park Ridge. The girls got the bedrooms; the three boys shared a room in the basement.

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Tribune photo by Chris Walker

Mark Smithe does a U2/iTunes impersonation for a commercial.

60,000 were given away.) Getting the Smithes in front of the camera wasn't easy. They're not egomaniacs. And they're not showbiz types.

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to help them.

"If you think of furniture commercials, it's always just panning a showroom with obnoxious graphics," says O'Neil, who has directed all the Smithe commercials. "I said, 'Let's get you guys on camera.'"

So, somewhat reluctantly, they let themselves become the public face of Walter E. Smithe Furniture.

Those early Smithe commercials were straight-forward affairs, with each brother talking about his area of expertise —

Walt discussed the merchandise, Tim the company's designers, and Mark Smithe's delivery

Making ads pop with pop culture

Brothers Walt, Tim and Mark Smithe — the faces of Walter E. Smithe Furniture — seem to have hit on something with their ubiquitous ads.

"They've done a wonderful job building a distinctive brand," says Tim Calkins, a professor of marketing at Northwestern University. "And they've been able to personalize a retail chain through the use of the brothers. Their advertising is creative, it's timely and it's interesting, so people remember it and they like it."

The commercials are created in-house. The process starts with Tim Smithe, Pam Thorson (the company's director of advertising) and director/editor Bill O'Neil of O'Neil Productions of Wilmette.

"Pam, Bill and I are always on the watch for pop culture. We've got the radar out for that," Tim Smithe says.

When they get a topic, Smithe says, he tries to figure a way to blend it into an ad. Then he and Thorson meet

with his brothers and throw ideas around. They hammer out a script, call in O'Neil and start filming. Smithe says that doing everything in-house allows them to be quick on their feet. He cites the U2 music video takeoff.

"If we'd done that with a large agency, it would have been flying people in from New York and storyboards and approvals along the way," he says. "Instead we did it on the turn of a dime. There's a certain time and simplicity factor, so from the time of the idea to the time we shoot it can be as short as a week."

Calkins says that by minimizing production costs and media costs and doing those quick turnarounds, Smithe gets a bigger bang for its advertising budget.

"They go a long way with a limited budget through the use of creativity," he says.

An added factor in the commercials' success are the brothers, who come across as regular guys.

"You think a huge corporation is going to have pencil pushers and button touchers," says Lynn Hamilton, vice president of the Shirley Hamilton Agency, a Chicago talent agency. "But these are guys who you'd go to dinner with, you know? I also think, coming from a family business myself, to see how they interact with each other just gives you the feeling that they're good people, that you'd want to do business with those people."

But even as likable as the brothers are, do they run the risk of oversaturation or going to the well too often?

Not as long as they keep the commercials clever and topical, O'Neil says.

"As furniture commercials go, what the Smithes are doing is great," he says. "They're having a lot of fun. The Smithes stand out because they're doing silly things."

Says Tim Smithe, "Pop culture is always changing and so are we."

— William Hageman

system and customer satisfaction — and, of course, the furniture. That's a galaxy away from the current "Star Wars" parody.

The journey from Point A to Point B started with an all-brother and outtakes reel that O'Neil and Tim Smithe put together as a birthday gift for mom Florence. It turned out so well that Tim carried along a copy to a speaking engagement.

"I was invited to speak to 300-some designers in Oak Brook," he says. "An hour and a half. So I'm speaking, and they're half listening, you know. Falling asleep. Then when I plugged it in, the place went up for grabs. To see these serious, stuffy guys laughing and having fun — someone yelled out, 'You should

use that as a commercial.'"

And three stars were born.

"I was at a gym on a treadmill," Mark says of the first time he caught one of the commercials. "And there's 10 televisions, all tuned to the same station. Then the commercial came on. And I thought, 'makeup and lighting. They can really do great things.'"

"The business steadily increased since we started the commercials," Walt says. "It's never gone completely crazy — no one can say that one commercial will bring customers in — but we kind of thought it re-established us in the marketplace. Now, a lot more people know about us than knew a few years ago."

So as long as strangers keep serenading them with the company jingle instead of pelting them with "Hardrock, Coco and Joe" DVDs, and as long as the business continues to grow, they'll keep doing the ads.

"The sky's the limit, Tim says. "With a strategy to continue Smithe parodies of relevant topics, really, the future is limitless," he says. "Case in point, I was just this morning sketching out my first ideas for The Three Tenors, featuring, of course, the Smithe brothers in a coliseum."

"And of course this summer's blockbuster is supposed to be 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.' So is there a 'Wally and the Sofa Factory' in our future?"

Stay tuned.

Mailer archives to land at U. of Texas

By Douglas Brinkley

New York Times News Service

For more than five decades, Norman Mailer has been analyzing, prodding and assaulting American culture, not only in his many books, articles and screenplays but also in about 25,000 letters, all saved as carbon copies and on computer disks. And beginning in Mailer's earliest years as a writer, his mother, Fannie, relentlessly squirreled away his notebooks, family photographs, canceled checks, sales receipts and even his dogs' identification tags.

"She was formidable when it came to compiling scrapbooks," Mailer's authorized biographer, Robert Lucid, said in a phone interview. "Her view was anything that emanated from Norman had value."

Always trust a mother's instincts: On Thursday, Mailer will be in Austin, Texas, to announce the sale of his archives to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas for \$2.5 million.

Stored in nearly 500 boxes weighing more than 20,000 pounds, the trove includes all manner of Mailerabilia dating back to his childhood and especially his early years at Harvard (class of '43), where he majored in aeronautical engineering and wrote an unpublished novel, "No Percentage."

When asked by e-mail how it felt to crate up his life, Mailer, 82 and living in Provincetown, Mass., said: "I have nine children. It does remind one a bit of sending them off to college."

Glenn Horowitz, a New York bookseller who brokered the sale, said: "The time has come to acknowledge Norman's profound accomplishment. His papers need to be used by scholars. With the natural aging process the handoff was inevitable."

Mailer cited several reasons for choosing the University of Texas, including a strong bond he forged with his fellow soldiers, many of them from Texas, in the South Pacific during World War II.

"I went overseas from a Ft. Bragg artillery training unit to Leyte, where I was assigned to the 112th Cavalry," Mailer said in his e-mail message. "They had been stripped of their horses, becoming, in effect, infantry. In that outfit, I learned a good bit about Texas and Texans, so that may have been a factor in choosing the University of Texas."

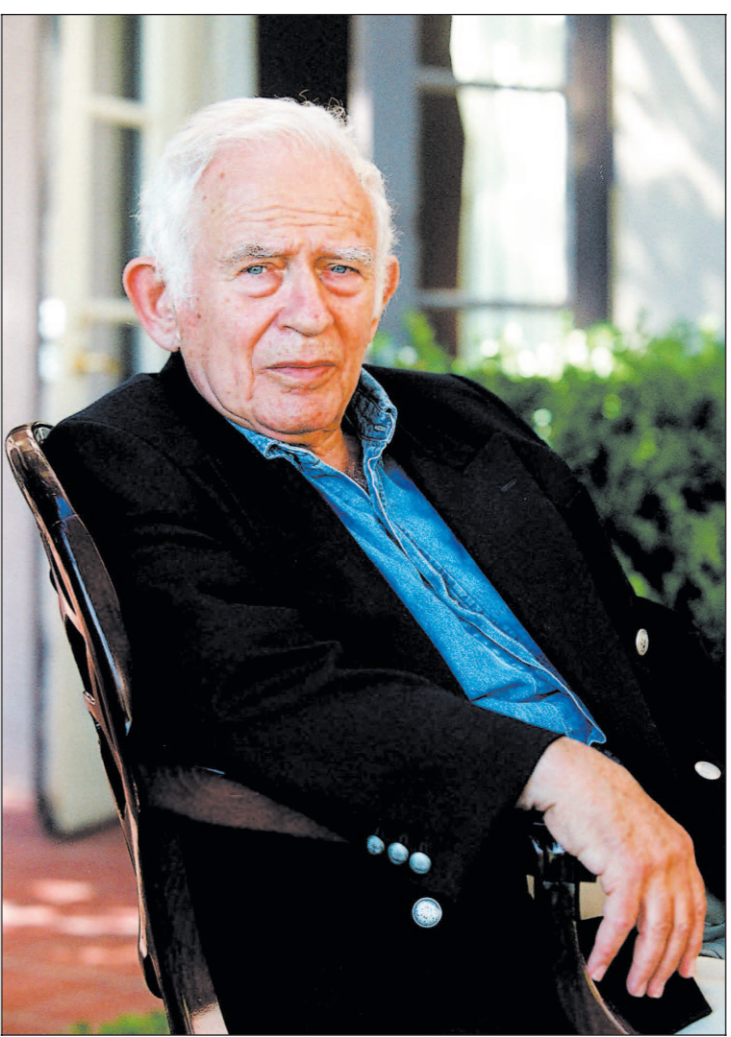
"However, despite a few sentimental and cultural attachments to the state, the largest part of my decision grew out of the fact that the Ransom Center at the University of Texas has one of the finest, if not the finest, collections of American literary archives in the world."

Joins an elite group

The center, founded in 1957, recently acquired the papers of several prominent writers, including James Jones, Don DeLillo, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Leon Uris. And in 2003 the university acquired the Woodward-Bernstein Watergate papers for \$5 million.

"Our goals are clear," said Thomas F. Staley, director of the Ransom Center. "As we approach our 50th anniversary, we continue to keep acquiring the major writers of the 20th Century like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams in playwrighting, and now Norman Mailer in everything."

Back in 1968, Mailer's mother, who died in 1985, aided by Lucid, then teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, rented space in a Midtown Manhattan high-rise to store her son's ballooning archives.



AP photo by Chris Pizzello

When asked how it felt to crate up his life for the archives, Norman Mailer said: "I have nine children. It does remind one a bit of sending them off to college."

"It was pretty stark," Lucid said. "The facility was just a light bulb with a cage around it. Norman was writing like mad and it was a race just to keep up with him."

Tucked away in the cartons are more than 100 combat letters Mailer wrote to his first wife, Beatrice Silverman, which formed the backbone of his first

published novel, "The Naked and the Dead."

Then there is intellectual jousting with Robert Lowell on Vietnam, Marshall McLuhan on the media, Joan Didion on literature and James Baldwin on civil rights.

By the time Mailer wrote "The Executioner's Song" (1979), generating 23 boxes

worth of research materials about the convicted killer Gary Gilmore, he had outgrown his Manhattan storage space. In the early 1990s the trunks were shipped to West Pittston, Pa., where Michael Lennon, an English professor at Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., began cataloging them.

Need for an archive

"He and Robert Lucid convinced me of the need for an archive," Mailer said. "If it weren't for Mike Lennon and Bob Lucid, my papers would be moldering in cartons on a wet cellar floor."

Lennon, a friend and executor of Mailer's estate, called Mailer a "string-saver." According to Lennon, the archive is brimming with literary oddities: a dozen finished screenplays, including one about Civil War general Dan Sickles; French aviation scrapbooks; mail Mailer received during his stay at the Bellevue Hospital Center, where he had been committed for stabbing his second wife; observations on New York graffiti art; and copies of CIA intelligence reports he used in researching his 1991 novel "Harlot's Ghost."

The archive also includes Mailer's notes on the presidential campaigns of Henry Wallace, John F. Kennedy and George McGovern, among other candidates, and there are cartons of documents related to his run for mayor of New York in 1969. Mailer also kept thick files on icons such as Muhammad Ali, Lee Harvey Oswald and Marilyn Monroe.

"Scholars writing on recent America will need to make a pilgrimage to Austin," Horowitz said. "You name the person — Neil Armstrong or Robert Kennedy or Pablo Picasso — and Mailer wrote about them."

Chamber Musicians, Sinfonietta set concerts

By John von Rhein

Tribune music critic

Two of the city's most enterprising classical music organizations, the Chicago Sinfonietta and the Chicago Chamber Musicians, have announced their concert schedules for 2005-06. Both groups will be celebrating their 19th seasons.

Music director Paul Freeman will lead the Sinfonietta's opening concerts Sept. 25 and 26, when he will be joined by the Chicago Mexican folk music group Sones de Mexico. Patrice Jackson, 2002 Sphinx Competition winner, will play Haydn's Cello Concerto in C.

Spanish guitarist Angel Romero will appear as soloist and conductor for the Nov. 7 concert, which holds music by Marcello, Falla and Beethoven. The orchestra's new-annual tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. Jan. 15 and 16, will be a collaboration with Chicago's Deeply Rooted Dance Theater and the Chicago Children's Choir.

Pianist Navah Perlman (daughter of Itzhak Perlman) and the Northern Illinois University Steel Band will join Freeman and the orchestra March 12 and 13. The program includes Chopin's Second Piano Concerto.

Gustav Holst's "The Planets" will close the Sinfonietta season May 14 and 15, with projected images of the solar system created by Jose Francisco Salgado of the Adler Planetarium and Vectors & Pixels Unlimited. The Haitian violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain will perform his "Voodoo Violin Concerto No. 1."

Concerts will be given at Dominican University's Lund Auditorium, River Forest; and Orchestra Hall, 220 S. Michigan Ave. For further information, phone 312-236-3681.

The Chicago Chamber Musicians, the city's flagship chamber music organization, will continue its exploration of Robert Schumann's chamber output during 2005-06, also showcasing its resident Chicago String Quartet in three concerts.

The Sept. 25-26 concerts will include music by Faure, John Harbison and early English brass works. The world premiere of Dana Wilson's "Daylight at Midnight" for brass quintet will highlight the Oct. 16-17 program.

More brass (and woodwind) music will make up the Nov. 13-14 concerts, which include works of Beethoven, Gounod and Ingolf Dahl. Alban Berg's "Lyric Suite" and Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 make up the Chicago String Quartet concerts of Feb. 19 and 20.

Brahms' Serenade No. 1 (in a version for nine players) will be performed along with music of Schubert and Richard Strauss on March 26 and 27. The season finale May 7-8 holds Schumann's A-Major String Quartet and Shostakovich's Piano Quintet in G Minor.

For further information, call 312-225-5226. johnvonrhein@tribune.com

A toast to Thompson

By Peter Carlson

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Since Hunter S. Thompson killed himself in February, magazines from Rolling Stone to the American Journalism Review have printed tributes to the gonzo journalist. If Thompson is reading his obits in the Great Beyond, his favorite eulogy is probably the one published in Modern Drunkard, the Denver-based magazine of inebriation, which hailed him as a great writer and a great drunk.

"There was always a powerful comfort in knowing he was out there somewhere in the night, roaring drunk, guzzling high-octane whiskey and railing against a world amok with complacency and hypocrisy," wrote Frank Kelly Rich, Modern Drunkard's editor/publisher. "Hunter was the last of a long, distinguished line of drunkard heroes." Rich wrote, a line in which he included Ernest Hemingway, Humphrey Bogart, Winston Churchill, W.C. Fields and Mark Twain.

"Nowadays the main rule is Play It Safe," he writes. "Not only should you look before you leap, you should think very seriously about attending a Leapers Anonymous meeting and discussing the possibility that you have a leaping problem."

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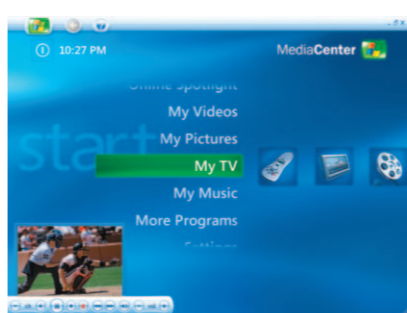
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— As quoted 11/10/04 in THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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