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# Floyd Gibbons: A Journalistic Force of Nature in Early 20th Century America

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FLOYD GIBBONS: A JOURNALISTIC FORCE OF NATURE IN EARLY 20<sup>th</sup>

CENTURY AMERICA

by

Andrew J. Nelson

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Journalism and Mass Communications

Under the supervision of Professor John R. Bender

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2011

FLOYD GIBBONS: A JOURNALISTIC FORCE OF NATURE IN EARLY 20<sup>th</sup>  
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University of Nebraska, 2011

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“Floyd Gibbons: A Journalistic Force of Nature in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America” examines some of the key journalistic work of dashing newsman Floyd Gibbons and his status as one of the top reporters to ever file a news story. This thesis will look at the world in which Gibbons inhabited 85 to 100 years ago, what made him the man and journalist he was and his work as a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* compared to what his competitors at national newspapers wrote.

As a reporter, Gibbons was remarkably aggressive and could be counted upon to get the story, no matter what it was or where it was to be found. Some of his tactics would today be considered unethical and he was a master of newsroom politics. Yet a key part of his work was his sympathy for his fellow man, which led to sometimes “graphic and emotional” coverage. A celebrity in his day, Gibbons today is an under-examined figure in American journalism history, yet one whose career yields lessons for current and future journalists and newsgatherers.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“The only qualities essential for real success in journalism are rat-like cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability....” Nicholas Tomalin, “Stop the Press, I Want to Get On,” *Sunday Times Magazine*, 26 Oct. 1969.

100 years ago, a 23-year-old police reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune* named Floyd Gibbons got his first big break. He was dispatched to the town of Winter, Wisconsin, where an eccentric named John Dietz and his family were involved in a confrontation with authorities at their cabin in the woods. It was a national story, and Winter bustled with activity as reporters prowled about and the sheriff swore in volunteer deputies.

The standoff went on for days. And when Wisconsin's attorney general showed up at the cabin to try to convince Dietz to give up, it was big news.

But there was only one available telephone in town. And any tardiness on a reporter's part meant he would spend a lengthy time in line before filing, and in the days of highly-competitive multi-newspaper cities, that was not good.

Gibbons drove back into Winter in a car with “Red” Schwartz of the *Minneapolis Journal*, his primary competitor, ahead of the rest of the pack. Schwartz had arranged to have the phone first – a local lumberjack was watching it for him. But when they hit town, instead of waiting for Schwartz to file, Gibbons jumped from the automobile, grabbed a hidden hatchet, climbed up a telephone pole, chopped the only working line, scrambled down, jumped back into the car and roared off to the nearest telegraph office, and sent his story there, scooping Schwartz and the rest of the press pack. Gibbons wound up in jail. But his paper was so happy with his performance it

gladly got him out of trouble by paying for the time the phone was out of use, and gave him a bonus (E. Gibbons 41-45).

Such antics would characterize Gibbons career, first as a police reporter in Minneapolis, then as a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, and finally as a radio reporter for NBC and the International News Service.

But the results of these tactics were not just scoops and juicy tales reporters would regale each other over drinks. Gibbons would become, between 1914 and 1929, the leading print journalist in the United States, beating the New York-based national news media to scoops. Books written by Gibbons, including an early comprehensive biography of German flying ace Manfred Von Richthofen, the “Red Baron,” are frequently reprinted and can easily be found in libraries, bookstores and online even if they, and he, are not as widely known as other writers from his era.

His scoops affected world politics. His first-person account of the sinking of the passenger ship *Laconia* by the German navy was read aloud from the floor of Congress, helping to spur the United States into World War I (E. Gibbons 72-73).

The best example of this is Gibbons’ 1921 reporting on the famine in Russia. Gibbons was for a while the only western reporter with the skill to get to the most devastated area – access he gained by artfully bullying a powerful Soviet official – and his vivid reporting shocked the world (E. Gibbons 150-157).

In his 2005 book *The Great Reporters*, British newspaper editor David Randall hailed Gibbons as one of the 13 best to ever file. Randall wrote:

If you had to nominate one reporter to save your skin by getting into a seemingly impossible situation and bringing out the story, then the person to send would be

Raphael Floyd Phillips Gibbons ... To get his story out first (or impede a rival – in Gibbons' eyes they amounted to two sides of the same task), he had no second's thought about breaking the law, damaging public property, defying a city fire brigade, putting terrorist threats to the test, booking himself on to a ship because it was likely to be torpedoed, out-bluffing the leadership of the Soviet Union, and sporting medals from dog shows to impersonate a war hero ... Outwardly flinty, trusting almost no one, and with a rat-like nose for his own advantage, he seems a man easier to admire at a distance than to know close-up (Randall, 159 and 176).

One thing that separates Gibbons from most of his companions and competitors, though, is that he was not only really good at getting the story, he could write it exceptionally well. Not only were his dispatches vivid and descriptive, they contained dialogue that can sometimes only be matched today by a writer penning an article for a magazine like *Rolling Stone* or *Vanity Fair*.

This thesis will examine the work Gibbons produced in four separate episodes from 1914-1921

I will compare Gibbons' coverage of border trouble with the United States and Mexico from Dec. 1, 1914 to June 1, 1915, the United States in World War I from Jan., 1918 until June 8, 1918 when Gibbons was shot in the head near Lucy-le-Bocage, France (and therefore, no longer able to cover the war), troubles in Ireland in September and October, 1919 and coverage of the Russian Famine of 1921.

I will first see if he really did get the story no one else could by comparing Gibbons' work in the *Chicago Tribune* to that in publications that would be natural competitors: *The New York Herald*, *New York Evening Journal*, *The (New York) World*, *The New York Times* and *The (London) Times*. This thesis will look at how meritorious his legend is.

In the literature review, I will also look at the world Gibbons inhabited, aspects of his life, his education, his professional training, and his attitudes, all of which made him the reporter and writer he was. I will touch on the practices of newspapers and beliefs of editors that made them what they were then, but no longer are.

His goodness is not clear-cut, though. After recovering from his war wounds, Gibbons participated in war bond drives and gave pro-war speeches, something almost any modern journalist would frown on, no matter what his or her personal beliefs. Still, I expect to find, on balance, Gibbons did far more good than harm.

Gibbons' gutsy approach to news gathering is important for us to look back at, nearly 100 years after he ruled the American journalism roost, because he had a unique combination of abilities. He could get the story, write it well and befriend powerful people but not be co-opted by them. In an era when many journalists are intimidated by the government, snowed by professional spin doctors, and overwhelmed by economic pressures, unimaginative editors and a transforming industry, it is important that Floyd Gibbons be remembered.



## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Beginnings and Growth of American Journalism

The American newsrooms that Floyd Gibbons first worked in during the early 20th century were a product of the industrial age, institutions that, despite all the changes wrought by electronic media in our own time, bear much more of a resemblance to the modern era than what a U.S. journalist might have worked in 100 years before Gibbons typed his first story.

Prior to the industrial age, newspapers were often small operations in which one person essentially put out the paper themselves by writing, editing, selling advertising and other functions necessary for a small business of its kind.

“Correspondents' for 18th-century and early 19th-century newspapers were generally travelers or friends of the editor in foreign ports who wrote letters back to their hometown newspapers,” sociologist and mass media scholar Michael Schudson (65) wrote in his 1978 book *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*.

At the beginning of Thomas Jefferson's presidency in 1801, there were about 200 newspapers published in the United States, 20 of them dailies (Stephens).

Daily publication allowed American newspapers “to cater to the need of merchants for up-to-date information on prices, markets and ship movements. By 1820, more than half of the newspapers in the largest cities had the words 'advertiser,' 'commercial' or 'mercantile' in their names” (Stephens).

These publications did not attempt to cater to the common man, as printing methods of the day made newspapers pricy. “They were often published on large, or 'blanket,' sheets, and at six cents or so per copy, they cost more than the average person could afford” (Stephens).

Journalism then was largely passive. News, “came by letter, out-of-town newspaper or someone stopping by with an interesting tidbit they might have heard from a traveler at a tavern. 'No mail yesterday,' wrote the editor of the *Orleans Gazette* in 1805. 'We hardly know what we shall fill our paper with that will have the appearance of news’” (Stephens).

This did not last. A new technology, a product of the burgeoning industrial age, upended the American newspaper industry, and that of every other country. It spurred a major change in how news got to the public.

“On the morning of Sept. 3, 1833, a paper printed on four letter-size pages filled with human-interest stories and short police reports appeared on the streets of New York. Its publisher was a young printer named Benjamin Day, and his paper, *The Sun*, sold for one penny” (Stephens).

America's largest newspaper at the time was the *Courier and Enquirer* of New York, with a daily circulation of 4,500 in a city of 218,000 people. The venerable *Times* of London sold 10,000 copies per day in 1830; the city's population at the time was two million. But only two years after the first *Sun* hit the streets, Day was selling 15,000 copies daily (Stephens).

He was able to do this because of a new development in technology. The cylinder

press, first developed in Europe, was introduced to the United States in 1825. American inventor Richard Hoe improved on this in 1832 with a two-cylinder version. By 1835, Day was printing *The Sun* on a press powered by steam (Stephens).

“These new presses made it possible to push circulations much higher. The old Gutenberg-type printing press could print maybe 125 newspapers per hour; by 1851 the *Sun's* presses were churning out 18,000 copies per hour” (Stephens).

Day wasn't alone for long when it came to publishing inexpensive newspapers in New York. James Gordon Bennett began publishing *The New York Herald* in 1835. Although Bennett would soon increase his price to two cents, two years later its daily circulation had shot to 20,000 (Stephens).

The new publishing barons geared their news towards the common man, because the common man could afford their products. The upper classes, and the now-threatened newspapers that served them, found this appalling. The content of papers like *The Sun* and *The Herald* seemed rather scandalous.

Police and court news was the bread and butter of the early penny press. But journalists “had to fight to win the right to report on trials without being held in contempt of court” (Stephens).

That news could not get into print by itself. In 1836, Bennett took a dramatic step when he reported the murder of a prostitute. What made it important was Bennett went to the house where the slaying occurred, investigated, and wrote up his findings in *The Herald*.

The story, published Monday, April 11, began as such:

Most atrocious murder – Our city was disgraced on Sunday by one of the most foul and premeditated murders, that ever fell to our lot to record. The following are the circumstances ascertained on the spot (Schechter 64).

The last sentence of Bennett's lede paragraph signaled a permanent change in American journalism.

Publishers like Bennett were in no position to collect the news themselves for long. Their operations were growing too fast, and were becoming sprawling and complicated. They had to hire specific people to get the news the public wanted.

The penny papers were the first to employ reporters. They were “assigned to the police, the courts, the commercial district, the churches, high society and sports” (Schudson 27). And because of the nature of the penny press, these reporters not only collected news, they wrote “human interest” stories, basically because they grabbed the interest of large numbers of readers.

News, as contemporary readers understand it, became the focus of the daily paper. “The penny papers did not depend on the usual trickle of stale news but sought it out” (Schudson 23). This was a drastic change.

“Until the 1830s, the newspaper provided a service to political parties and men of commerce; with the penny press a newspaper sold a product to a general readership and sold the readership to advertisers,” Schudson wrote. “It claimed to represent, colorfully but without partisan coloring, events in the world. Thus, the news product of one paper could be compared to that of another for accuracy, liveliness and timeliness” (25).

It was the penny papers that started covering what happened to average people. “In literature in the eighteenth century, aristocratic conventions had dictated that the

common aspects of everyday life could receive only comic treatment if they were dealt with at all,” wrote philologist and comparative literature scholar Erich Auerbach in his book, *Mimesis* (Schudson 26-27).

Bennett took things a step further again by hiring reporters to work overseas and in Washington D.C., where papers once published little more than letters from their local congressman or senator.

They were not welcomed. “The institution of paid reporters was not only novel but, to some, shocking,” Schudson wrote (24).

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of those most displeased by this development was prominent puritanical Massachusetts Congressman and former U.S. President John Quincy Adams. In 1842 he wrote in his diary that sons of President John Tyler “divulged all his cabinet secrets” to two “hired” reporters from *The Herald*. “His use of 'hired' to qualify 'reporters' suggests how new, and perhaps disreputable, the institution of a reportorial staff was,” Schudson said (24).

Reporters from New York were working all over the world. By the end of 1837, *The Herald*,

... boasted two Washington correspondents, permanent correspondents in Jamaica and Key West; occasional correspondents in London, Philadelphia, and Boston; two Canadian correspondents during the MacKenzie Rebellion of 1837; and a correspondent roving New York State to report on the wheat crop. This was expensive, *The Herald* noted, but was done to gratify the public. A year later *The Herald* hired six European correspondents as regular contributors (Schudson 23-24).

It was a new career field, and its practitioners were not exactly polished professionals. Newspaper editor Charles Dana's conception of news (“whatever divine

Providence permitted to occur I was not too proud to report”) worked well with his notion that, unlike the medical and legal professions, “there is no system of maxims or professional rules that ... is laid down for the guidance of the journalist. (Schiller 183)”

Newspaper publishers figured out that by positioning themselves on the side of public good, they could ingratiate themselves with the public. This resulted in crusades against crime and corruption. The penny press offered “common sense” compared to the “pretensions to knowledge” offered by their predecessors (Schiller 180-183).

Schudson wrote:

The six-penny papers responded to the penny newcomers with charges of sensationalism. ... It was common for penny papers, covering a murder trial, to take a verbatim transcript of the trial and spread it across most, or all, of the front page. What the six-penny press decried as immoral was that a murder trial should be reported at all (23).

The six-penny papers in New York tried to undermine *The Herald* with a “moral war,” basically designed to persuade that Manhattan's most-successful penny paper was immoral. Really, it was one of many efforts by the Federalist elites to hold on to their old status that was fast disappearing with the industrialization and democratization of America. This was part of a broader trend toward a more democratic society (Schudson 55-56).

The penny papers themselves became part of the establishment, and mostly embraced their new role. James Gordon Bennett bragged that congressmen and diplomats in Washington read his paper. “The first men of the country subscribe to *The Herald*,” he said. “We learn that it is a constant companion of the breakfast table of the President and Vice-President at Washington” (Schiller 72).

The income of newspaper companies increased as circulation rose; more money came in and editors hired more reporters. *The Herald* sent a reporter to cover the Mexican War; 63 *Herald* reporters covered the Civil War (Stephens).

The second early-19<sup>th</sup> century technology to revolutionize newspapers was Samuel Morse's invention of the telegraph. It improved the scope of news coverage and the speed at which it could get to readers.

Mitchell Stephens, a New York University journalism professor, put it this way:

Newspapers became the major customers of telegraph companies, and the cost of telegraph transmissions led to the formation of wire services like the Associated Press, which was founded as a cooperative venture by New York newspapers in 1848. The telegraph for the first time enabled newspapers to fill their pages with news that happened yesterday in cities hundreds, then thousands, of miles away. With the successful completion of a transatlantic cable in 1866, American newspapers could suddenly print news from Europe with similar promptness. (Stephens).

This set the stage for the third major development that would revolutionize American newspapers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: The Civil War.

“Reporters overcame terrible conditions, sometimes heavy-handed government attempts to censor their reports and, when they crossed enemy lines, the threat of imprisonment as spies,” wrote Stephens.

The war required greater staff sizes. Papers expanded and added Sunday editions. News gathering costs soared. In the first years of the Civil War, New York papers spent \$60,000-\$100,000 a year covering the conflict (Schudson 67). The demand for war news was intense and newspapers were the only place to get it. Daily newspaper reading became a habit of millions (Dicken-Garcia 52, 56).

*The New York Times* circulation jumped from 45,000 to 75,000 per day after Ft. Sumter. Profits soared. For the *New York Tribune* in 1850, profits were at \$60,000 but from May 1864-May 1865 they were at \$252,000 (Dicken-Garcia 56-57).

But the war did not necessarily show journalism at its best.

Phillip Knightley, author of *The First Casualty*, a seminal work on war reporting, criticizes the reporters who covered the Civil War, saying that as a group, they failed to live up to the task. No American correspondent had the experience necessary to deftly cover such an industrial-age slaughter.

Salaries were low – \$10 to \$25 per week. This made journalists susceptible to bribes from officers (Knightley 23).

News became really dramatic during the war. Every day readers became accustomed to reading breathless dispatches from the battlefield. And when it was all over and the news became routine again it was a bit of a letdown.

“Sensational” postwar stories about corruption and reforms provided a way to continue to thrill. Journalists simply adopted wartime lessons to a time of peace. And as they adapted newsgathering techniques learned during the war – such as using multiple sources, interviewing, ferreting out stories against all objections and odds ...They increasingly went beyond what some at the time believed were the appropriate bounds of journalistic conduct (Dicken-Garcia 90).

It was after the Civil War that reporters began getting criticized for making private matters public.

Reporters went to great length to find out about the details of President Grover Cleveland's wedding – details the President would have preferred to keep quiet, including aspects of his honeymoon (Dicken-Garcia 194-196).



Before the Civil War, editors were the dominant figures at newspapers. But that changed as newspapers grew. “The age of the reporter replaced the age of the editor. ... Managing editors first appeared in the 1840s, city editors in the 1850s. The latter, at first usually identical with the chief reporters, dominated the news-editorial organization by the 1870s” (Dicken-Garcia 61).

By that time, news became big business. Lincoln Steffens likened newspapers to factories and department stores. The largest newspaper publishers were among the biggest corporations in the country. The top 500 industrial companies in 1917 included Hearst, the Chicago Daily News and E. W. Scripps, sharing that list with such huge operations as General Electric, Westinghouse and Western Electric (Dicken-Garcia 57).

Knightley (44) describes the period between the American Civil War and World War I as a “‘golden age’ for the war correspondent.” The *London Daily News*' circulation tripled during the Franco-Prussian War. Armies had little experience with journalists and pretty much let them do what they wanted. War stories read like adventure stories (43-44).

The names of many reporters became household words. Archibald Forbes and Stephen Crane were recruited for their fiction-writing prowess. Mark Kellogg, an Associated Press stringer, was with Lt. Col. George Custer at Little Bighorn.

And they would get involved in the fighting. James Creelman of the New York Journal led a bayonet charge in the Spanish-American war (Knightley 43-45).

Reporters like Nellie Bly and Henry Morton Stanley became celebrities. In the Spanish-American War, the names of Sylvester Scovel and Richard Harding Davis became household words (Schudson 68-69).

Also about this time came some of the first signs of professionalization. “The Whitechapel Club in Chicago, founded in 1889 and named after the London site of some of the crimes of Jack the Ripper, was a gathering place for reporters,” Schudson wrote. It was a raucous place. “But the Club had an important practical function, too, for reporters criticized one another's work there” (69-70).

More and more reporters were college graduates. Where once grads had to prove they could overcome the “handicap” of a college education to be hired by Horace Greeley, by the 1880s Charles Dana was seeking out college graduates for jobs at the New York *Sun*; “Lincoln Steffens, in his brief stint as editor of the *Commercial Advertiser*, hired college graduates almost exclusively” (Schudson 68). In a 1900 editorial, the trade publication *The Journalist* announced: “Today the college bred men are the rule.” The paper observed that with more educated people in the reporting ranks, newspaper writing and the reputation of newspapermen and their salaries all went up.

Many young reporters, particularly the college graduates, sought literary careers and were less interested in focusing on facts. But even “in the bawdiest days of yellow journalism, the *New York Times* began to climb to its premier position by stressing an 'information' model, rather than a 'story' model, of reporting” (Schudson 5).

In the late part of the century, many newspapers discouraged their writers from applying any opinion to their stories. If any slipped by copy editors, they were admonished that editors write editorials and reporters write news. Some reporters, like Lincoln Steffens, experienced what would trouble budding writers who worked for newspapers in the second half of the 20th century: All facts please, no literary stylings necessary, thank you very much. The emphasis on facts probably had a lot to do with the growing standing of science in the eyes of the public (Schudson 77).

Schudson addressed the conflict between editors and reporters:

They (reporters) had every reason to want to be colorful and enterprising, every reason to resent the dull discipline their editors tried to impose. The city editors, for their part, had to look in two directions; toward grooming reporters to get the news and write it with accuracy and verve; and toward satisfying the editor/publisher; which meant, at a minimum, keeping their paper free of the easily identifiable errors and excesses that would lead to libel, embarrassment, or public criticism for the newspaper. ... Besides, if he could hold reporters in conformity with rules and procedures he imposed, he could break them of some of their arrogance, make his own work easier, and make his own mark on the newspaper (81).

By the turn of the century, editors were making different news judgment calls than they had in the preceding decades. A textbook on journalism suggested reporters “cultivate the friendship of influential citizens” and that “rank and social position add to the importance of news ... The mere killing of a mechanic or day laborer seldom gets more than a paragraph unless the circumstances are extraordinary ... but if the King of England or the German Emperor falls down and fractures the royal ankle the incident is worth of note and considered a good story. It is easy to see why this is so” (Schiller 182-183).

Prominent New York *Sun* writer Julian Ralph, “mentioned a negotiation between a journalist and an important official, who together decided 'to publish or not to publish, as the two agree.' Ralph said a 'beat,' as an exclusive news story was often called, was 'growing to be more and more a product of intimate acquaintance with public men, and less and less a result of agility of mind and body.' ... News is now gathered systematically by men stationed at all the outlets of it, like guards at the gate of a walled city, by whom nothing can pass in or out unnoticed” (Schiller 183).

The rise of this kind of behavior was congruent with the rise of objectivity.

Schudson writes that journalists in this era, including the muckrakers, had an abiding faith in the power of facts. Just lay the facts before the public and enlightenment will follow – or at least a reasonable discussion. This faith in facts was one of the foundations of objectivity and one of the rationales for the reporter's existence: The reporter is the expert in finding facts that help the rest of the people understand the world around them.

Schudson describes pre-World War I journalists:

To the extent they were interested in facts, naive empiricists; they believed that facts are not human statements about the world but aspects of the world itself. This view was insensitive to the ways in which the 'world' is something people construct by the active play of their minds and by their acceptance of conventional – not necessarily 'true' – ways of seeing and talking ... From the 1920s on, the idea that human beings individually and collectively construct the reality they deal with has held a central position in social thought (5-6).

Things changed, though, after World War I.

Journalists, like others, lost faith in verities a democratic market society had taken for granted. Their experience of propaganda during the war and public relations thereafter convinced them that the world they reported was one that interested

parties had constructed for them to report. In such a world, naive empiricism could not last (Schudson 6).

Another change by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the power of financial capital in the newspaper industry. Advertisers had once not been big or powerful enough to control newspaper content. But by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had grown considerably and spent more. In 1890, advertisers spent what is estimated to be about \$300 million; this increased to \$1 billion by 1909. Dan Schiller wrote in his book, *Objectivity and the News*:

To collar a share of growing advertising budgets, the newspaper was prepared to make concessions. Stunts, gimmickry, sensation, flagrant self-advertisement, aggressive investigative campaigns, and yellow journalism were used to wrest readers from other activities and to seize their attention for advertisers (185).

With the expansion of business power in the United States came the career field of public relations. In 1919, Frank I. Cobb of the New York *World* described the result: Public relations men had closed off channels of information. It seemed every important person or organization, including big companies and politicians, had them. Spokesmen controlled a large part of what the public knew about their clients (Schudson 139).

In World War I, the allies set up a massive propaganda operation. Joseph Goebbels would base his Nazi propaganda machine on the WWI British model. Exaggerated stories of German atrocities were rampant, and journalists covering the war largely bought into them (Knightley 86).

With some exceptions – Italian reporter Luigi Barzini being probably the best example – journalists played along. They did not have the moral courage to refuse.

The European public actually knew what was going on – they knew of all the young men in their towns and neighborhoods who had died or suffered grievous wounds on the front. But when they read the papers did not reflect this reality. Trust in the press declined tremendously (Knightley 183-118).

Knightley argues (123) that American reporters tended to do a better job than their European counterparts in attempting to accurately describe the war. Many tried to discredit false stories of German atrocities. “Some refused to compromise their professional integrity. They packed up and went home, forfeiting their accreditation, rather than remain silent.”

Still, American press censorship during the war “reached almost ludicrous proportions” Knightley (140) wrote. But some clever Americans were able to find ways around it.

One of them was Floyd Gibbons.

#### The Life of Floyd Gibbons

Floyd Gibbons fit perfectly into, and was a product of, the American newspaper, as it existed in the first decade of the 20th century.

He was born in Washington D.C. on July 16, 1887, to Edward Thomas Gibbons and Emma Phillips Gibbons. He was the eldest of five; his younger siblings were two girls and two boys. His upbringing was decidedly middle to upper class, with his father being a “butter and egg man,” a business owner (E. Gibbons 17-22).

Some of Floyd Gibbons' cleverness may have come from his father. Edward Gibbons published a small community paper. To ensure every issue was thoroughly read,

he would print “certain lucky numbers” in some of the copies. Those fortunate enough to acquire a “lucky copy” could claim prizes –like butter, eggs and cheese – at Edward Gibbons' store (E. Gibbons 22).

Edward Gibbons had only one delivery wagon, but painted on one side “Wagon No. 1” and “Wagon No. 2” on the other. “Each side was painted a different color while the back and wheels were painted a neutral color to harmonize the wagon's sides” (E. Gibbons 23). He also had a knack for thinking and talking fast when dealing with his customers, something his son (and Floyd's youngest brother) Edward figured Floyd inherited and put to good use as a reporter.

Gibbons enrolled in Gonzaga College High School at age 11, taking arithmetic, English, Greek and Latin (E. Gibbons 20). Not long after that, the elder Gibbons, apparently struck with wanderlust, decided to pull up stakes and move to the Midwest, settling in Des Moines, Iowa. He did this despite friends, family and even his own wife expressing fears they would be waylaid by bands of Indians. They weren't. The family settled into a 12-room house, and Floyd attended Crocker School. Later, a business opportunity took the Gibbons family to Minneapolis, where they lived at 1372 Spruce Place, in the Loring Park neighborhood. Floyd attended Central High School. About the time he graduated, his father took him to the 1904 St. Louis Exposition (E. Gibbons 24-31).

He then attended Georgetown University, where the future globetrotting correspondent did well in mathematics but flunked high-school-level English, Greek and Latin. He was implicated in some pranks, including one that flooded the entire first floor

of a dormitory, and perhaps worse, he was caught playing craps. The Jesuits kicked him out and told him never to come back. He returned to Minneapolis in 1906. He needed a job (E. Gibbons 20-22).

His sister Zelda had a boyfriend whose father operated a coal yard in Lucca, N.D. Gibbons got a job there, shoveling coal and piling lumber during the day. There was a local weekly newspaper, and Gibbons helped the publisher print it on press nights. “To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time he smelled printer's ink,” youngest brother Edward wrote nearly a half-century later (E. Gibbons 32).

Exactly what motivated Gibbons to enter journalism is not clear. Did he fall in love with the smell of printer's ink in a tiny North Dakota town or did it simply seem like heaven compared to working in a coalfield? Either way, when he returned to Minneapolis a few months later he started looking for newspaper work. He soon found it at the *Minneapolis Daily News* (E. Gibbons 32).

To 21<sup>st</sup> century journalists who struggle to find a first job, it might be surprising that Gibbons found work at a newspaper in a major metropolitan area so quickly. But these were the days before widespread journalism training in academia, an institutionalized system of internships and working your way up through smaller-city newspapers. Minneapolis had several newspapers in the early 20th century. For the time, someone like Gibbons would have been a pretty typical hire: middle class, literate, high school education, and some college. His experience at the small North Dakota paper and the fact that his father was a prominent businessman probably didn't hurt either (E. Gibbons 17-32).



Gibbon's boss was William G. Shepherd, who later wrote the definitive account of the March 25, 1911, Triangle Shirtwaist fire and would later be the first foreign journalist to defeat British censors and report the first Zeppelin attack on London. Floyd's father considered newspaper reporters to be drunken reprobates, so he visited Shepherd and asked him to fire his son. Shepherd declined, telling the elder Gibbons that his son seemed to have a natural aptitude for journalism (E. Gibbons 17-32).

Over the next few years as a reporter in Minneapolis, Gibbons proved Shepherd's faith in him was not misplaced. First at the *Daily News* and later at the *Minneapolis Tribune*, Gibbons earned a reputation as a man adept at breaking news and covering oddball assignments. That led to him being sent to Wisconsin to cover the Dietz standoff.

Gibbons family would later recall that as a youth, he didn't seem interested in "sweating out" books. But for much of his time in Minneapolis, Gibbons roomed with a reporter 25 years older than him, Jack Jensen, whom Gibbons would later describe as a top-notch reporter who drank two bottles of whiskey per day and had a knack for creating vivid copy.

Jensen may have been such a great writer because he was as equally interested in literature as he was drink. He introduced Gibbons to the great works of the English writers. Gibbons would later credit Jensen with sparking his interest in reading and for teaching him how to "write by reading" (E. Gibbons 40-41).

His Wisconsin exploits helped seal Gibbons reputation. Less than two years later, he decided to try his luck in Chicago. His timing wasn't the best, for the city was, in May 1912, in the midst of a newspaper strike. Still, after one week of sleeping on a bench in

Grant Park, Gibbons landed a job at a socialist newspaper. The gig did not last long. A few months later the editor called in the staff, told them the newspaper was closing, and that it was so broke he couldn't pay them their last two weeks' salary. However, he added: "...that saloon across the street owes us about to hundred dollars for advertising, and if you fellows want to try to get anything out of the owner, it's all right by me."

Gibbons and "about 15 others" hit the bar "like a cyclone," his brother later wrote. "When they got thorough, all that was left was the mahogany bar and the plate glass mirror, on which was written in chalk, 'Keep smiling'" (E. Gibbons, 48-49).

The *Chicago Tribune* hired Gibbons two weeks later. He would (usually) work there for the next 17 years. He would make his international reputation there, and travel the world.

During his early years on the *Tribune*, Gibbons frequently jumped to other papers, and to public relations companies. Each time the paper would hire him back and often give him a raise (E. Gibbons 50-53).

As in Minneapolis, Gibbons built a reputation in Chicago as a top-notch reporter and writer, getting himself involved in the paper's coverage of "quack doctors" and becoming the star of the *Tribune* newsroom (E. Gibbons 52-57). So, two years after his arrival at the *Tribune* when trouble brewed on the U.S./Mexico border, his editors sent Gibbons south, filing his first bylined dispatch for the *Tribune* in December 1914 as "Floyd P. Gibbons."

Instead of merely hanging around the border, Gibbons ventured into the Mexican interior and hooked up with Pancho Villa, interviewing the Mexican rebel leader and

accompanying his army into battle, essentially embedding with him for months, “filing copy that the rest of the American press could only read and envy” (Randall 166).

From then on, Gibbons was the paper's main national writer, covering a variety of stories, including big-time politics, the 1916 U.S. attempt to capture Villa, and signing up fishing boat crewman to look into rumors of Japanese naval activity off the west coast (Randall 166-167).

As war clouds loomed in early 1917, the paper told him he would cross the Atlantic and cover the European conflict. The assignment came in February, the same month in which the German government threatened to sink without warning any ship approaching the British Isles and France.

The *Tribune* booked him on the *Fredrick VIII*, which was taking home the German ambassador to the United States. The paper was betting a ship carrying the ambassador would not be torpedoed and Gibbons would arrive safely in Europe.

Gibbons had other ideas. Again looking for a sensational scoop, he found out which ship would be the first to travel to Britain in defiance of the German ultimatum and booked himself onto it – the Cunard liner *Laconia*, bound for Liverpool.

Eight days after leaving New York City, the *Laconia* was torpedoed 160 miles off the west coast of Ireland. Gibbons, in a story that appeared a few days later in the *Tribune*, described what happened next:

The first cabin passengers were gathered in the lounge Sunday evening, with the exception of the bridge fiends in the smoking room.

“Poor Butterfly” was dying wearily on the talking machine, and several couples were dancing.

About the tables in the smoke room the conversation was limited to the announcement of bids and orders to the stewards. Before the fireplace was a little

gathering which had been dubbed the Hyde Park corner – an allusion I don't quite fully understand. The group had about exhausted available discussion when I projected a new bone of contention.

“What do you say are our chances of being torpedoed?” I asked.

“Well,” drawled the deliberate Mr. Henry Chetham, a London solicitor, “I should say about four thousand to one.”

Lucien J. Jerome of the British diplomatic service, was returning with an Ecuadorian valet from South America, interjected: “Considering the zone and class of this ship, I should put it down at two hundred and fifty to one that we don't meet a sub.”

At that moment, the ship gave a sudden lurch sideways and forward. There was a muffled noise like the slamming of some large door a good distance away. The slightness of the shock and the meekness of the report compared with my imagination were disappointing. Every man in the room was on his feet in an instant.

“We're hit!” shouted Mr. Chetham.

“That's what we've been waiting for,” said Mr. Jerome.

“What a lousy torpedo!” said Mr. Kirby in typical New Yorkese. “It must have been a fizzer!”

It wasn't. Gibbons went on to describe the melee as the ship was abandoned, the passengers and crew floated away on lifeboats, and the ocean swallowed the *Laconia*, “like a piece of disappearing scenery in a panorama spectacle.”

The German submarine pulled up next to one of the lifeboats. Gibbons was not on that particular lifeboat. But a chief steward recounted the exchange to him.

As the boat's crew steadied its head into the wind, a black hulk, glistening wet and standing about eight feet above the surface of the water, approached slowly and came to a stop opposite the boat and not six feet from the side of it.

“What ship was dot?” The correct words in throaty English with the German accent came from the dark hulk, according to Chief Steward Ballyn's statement to me later.

“The *Laconia*,” Ballyn answered.

“Vot?”

“The *Laconia*, Cunard line,” responded the steward.

“Vot does she weigh?” was the next question from the submarine.

“Eighteen thousand tons.”

“Any passengers?”

“Seventy three,” replied Ballyn, “men, women, and children, some of them in this boat. She had over two hundred in the crew.”

“Did she carry cargo?”

“Yes.”

“Vell, you'll be all right. The patrol will pick up soon,” and without further sound, save for the almost silent fixing of the conning-tower lid, the submarine moved off” (F. Gibbons 340-343).

Gibbons’ account of the *Laconia*'s sinking electrified the country. It was read aloud on the floor of both houses of Congress, with special emphasis on the submarine commander's Teutonic query (Knightley 135). Less than two months later, the country was at war .

Once American troops arrived in France, Gibbons became difficult for American censors to handle, making unauthorized trips to “the real action” (Knightley 135).

Instead, he spent much of the next year digging up scoops, including beating the rest of the American press corps to cover the first salvo fired by the U.S. Army in the war (Randall 169-170). He complained his more cooperative colleagues were lazy (Taylor 67).

But in June 1918 at the front, Gibbons luck ran out (Randall 170). He was accompanying a battalion of U.S. Marines into battle when a German slug tore out his left eye. He and a wounded Marine major feigned death until nightfall, when they were able to creep off. Gibbons almost died in the military hospital (E. Gibbons 90-104).

Gibbons doctors described him as a marvelous patient. Informed he now had only one eye, he is said to have quipped: “Well, Doc, I won't have to squint down the neck of a bottle anymore, like you guys” (Taylor 68).

Meanwhile, the dispatch Gibbons filed was being published across the country. Military censors passed it, thinking it would be wrong to cut his copy to shreds when he was probably taking his last breaths. His story created the impression that the Marines had saved Paris from the advancing German hordes, and helped spark the reputation of the Marines as America's premier shock troops (Randall 170-171).

Gibbons recovered. He was soon sporting a patch over his left eye that would become “part of his own mythology” (Randall 171).

He was pretty much through covering World War I. The French awarded Gibbons the Croix de Guerre, and he was asked to go on a speaking tour of the United States.

His fellow correspondents threw Gibbons a going-away party, which included champagne and cigars. After dinner, there was a round of tributes to Gibbons. Then he stood up, “looking surprisingly vulnerable, visibly shaken. He cleared his throat. 'Now,' he said slowly. 'I'm gong to show you two-eyed bastards how to make a speech’” (Taylor 68).

Gibbons returned home a genuine celebrity, was met by a Marine guard of honor, and, beginning about Sept. 1, went on a lecture tour until the flu epidemic cut his tour short, with his last speech given in Omaha on Oct. 10 (E. Gibbons 112-116).

Gibbons was not the only war correspondent in those days to have pro-war feelings and decide to publicly air them. Richard Harding Davis had died two years before of a heart attack at age 52 while writing an article advocating that America join the Allies in the war (Taylor 55).

Gibbons returned to Paris late in 1918 “to run the *Chicago Tribune's* army edition and European service from an office next to Harry's Bar” (Randall 171). He reported from Ireland on Sinn Fein in 1919 and interviewed a formerly-incarcerated republican despite a British ban on doing so. The next year, he covered the Polish/Russian conflict. In order to get to the front, he dusted off his old correspondents uniform, “pinned some impressive-looking medallions from dog shows” (Randall 171) on it, “bluffed his way past guards,” marched into the office of the Polish chief of staff and demanded access to the front with military escort. For more than a month was the only U.S. correspondent reporting from the front (Randall 171).

The next year came what is considered Gibbons' greatest reportorial triumph: His stories on the Russian famine. The foreign press was barred from entering Russia. Most of the American press corps cooled its heels in Riga, Latvia, trying to cajole the Russians into letting them in (Randall 172). George Seldes, then the *Tribune's* Berlin correspondent, hatched a plan to get Gibbons into Russia (E. Gibbons, 152-153).

It went like this: Gibbons told his German pilot to keep the airplane ready for takeoff, and let it be known in various Riga watering holes that he was planning on an illicit flight into the Soviet Union. Sure enough, Gibbons was soon standing in the office of the Soviet ambassador (Gibbons 153).

The ambassador warned Gibbons that if he flew across the border, he would be shot down. Gibbons replied that the Soviets only had enough anti-aircraft guns to cover a fraction of the border. The ambassador then threatened to have Gibbons arrested. Gibbons

pointed out that the Soviets had just released all their U.S. prisoners in order to secure food aid and weren't likely to start jailing Americans again.

According to Gibbons:

He looked at me steadily a long time. Then he smiled and extended me his box of cigarettes.

“The government would prefer that you do not enter the country by airplane,” he said. “It would excite the people to see a foreign plane and we don't want them excited. Will you go to Moscow with me tonight by train?”

So, after all, it had been easy. Instead of breaking into Russia, I was invited in (E. Gibbons 153-154).

Soon, Gibbons was in the southern Russia city of Samara. This was a bit of a challenge, one he actually might have anticipated, but instead later called it “one of the shocks of my life,” for at the telegraph station he found the keyboard had only Cyrillic letters. Of course, his dispatch had been written in Latin letters in English.

Gibbons solved the problem by combing through his copy, and marking “the closest Greek letter equivalent to the Latin letters” (E. Gibbons 156).

It worked. Gibbons had successfully filed the first western dispatch from the famine-ravaged region (Randall 173).

In fact, Gibbons had a several-day lead on everybody else. While Gibbons was filing story after story from the famine region, the rest of the press corps was put on a slow train to Moscow, with no electricity or sleeping provisions, and then sequestered in a fleabag Moscow hotel crawling with vermin, and under the surveillance of the secret police, trapped in a bureaucratic black hole (Taylor 100-101).



And they were bombarded with cables from home. Editors were demanding an explanation as to why they were still in Moscow when Floyd Gibbons was in Samara, filing story after story (Taylor 101).

In the case of the *New York Times*, the paper that was fast becoming the premier print journalistic outfit in the United States was in the ignominious position of having to run Gibbons' copyrighted dispatch on its own pages (Taylor 101).

“Gibbons' dispatches were stark and presented a picture of relentless misery,” wrote British writer S.J. Taylor 69 years later, in her biography of Gibbons competitor, future Pulitzer Prize winner and *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty, who got to Samara several days after Gibbons. “Gibbons steadfastly recorded the suffering he witnessed, without glossing over ugly facts or resorting to sentimentality. His stories offered no easy solution to the horrors of the famine” (Taylor 102-103).

Taylor also contrasts Gibbons “graphic and emotional” coverage with Duranty's more “precise, professional, even-mannered” reporting. Taylor notes that Gibbons, although he knew his efforts were probably futile, purchased food for the starving people, and “carefully rationed out small chunks of black bread” to the hungry. Duranty did no such thing and distanced himself as much as possible from the suffering around him. “He was not part of it, and he never would be” (Taylor 103-105).

Gibbons continued his career with the *Tribune*, his exploits included a home-office-directed trip across the Sahara in order to find glamorous sheiks with harems of American and British women, due in part to the appeal of Rudolph Valentino's movies.

Gibbons' three-month trip in a caravan was a disappointment for his editors. He found no glamorous sheiks “throwing wide-eyed blondes over the camels and galloping off into the desert night” (Randall 173-174).

Gibbons became one of the first multimedia journalists in December, 1925, after walking into the the *Tribune* building on Christmas Eve. In the lobby, he was buttonholed by Quin Ryan, manager of WGN, which at the time was a new radio station operated by the paper. Ryan asked him to talk on-air the next night about some of the far-away places he had spent Christmas. Gibbons, who had buried his mother the month before, showed up “nervous and bewildered,” as Ryan later described him, telling WGN's listeners that with all the things he had experienced, he would trade it all for what they had, with kids playing by a Christmas tree. The broadcast created a sensation. “He brought a sincerity, a genuineness and a colorful story-telling ability that the radio tuners had never known before,” Ryan later wrote (E. Gibbons 195-196).

Gibbons resisted radio, claiming it was not his thing, but Ryan knew a winner when he heard one, and soon Gibbons was a regular on WGN. After leaving the *Tribune*, filing his last story in 1929, he moved on to NBC and the International News Service, acquiring the moniker “Your Headline Hunter.”

In the 1930s, Gibbons began suffering from health problems. A heart attack in 1934 failed to sideline him for long. A year later he was the first western reporter to get to the front during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. For months he reported from a base “at an altitude of 8,000 feet where temperatures reached 135 degrees by day and slumped to 50 at night” (Randall 175). Not a good place for a middle-aged American with heart

trouble, and he collapsed while broadcasting. He convalesced in Cairo but got board in less than a week so he took off for Palestine to cover the growing troubles between Jewish settlers and Arabs. He then left for Spain to report on its civil war (Randall 175-176).

Back in the United States, he began dial back, buying two farms in eastern Pennsylvania. At the beginning of World War II he signed a contract with INS to go to Europe, but his health was failing. On Sept. 24, 1939, he died at one of his farms in eastern Pennsylvania, at age 52 (E. Gibbons 331-343).

In death, Gibbons was honored in several ways:

In January 1941, the Veterans of Foreign Wars “Floyd Gibbons Post No. 500” was formed in New York City. Later that year, the Marine Corps League posthumously awarded Gibbons a gold medal, making him an honorary Marine – the first civilian to earn such an honor.

“Gibbons' bravery and initiative in endeavoring to obtain first-hand information of the battle by personal contact with front line troops and his comradeship with both officers and men endeared him to all Marines,” said General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., Marine Corps commandant in the early 1950s. “His name has become a legend in our Corps as we have always considered him one of us” (E. Gibbons, back cover flap).

In 1944, the liberty ship *S.S. Floyd Gibbons* was launched in Savannah, Georgia., as Gibbons' sister Zelda smashed “the traditional bottle of champagne on its bow” (E. Gibbons 349). Gibbons was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his radio work (Hollywood). And in 1962 he was portrayed by actor Scott Brady in an episode of

“The Untouchables” entitled “The Floyd Gibbons Story,” in which he and Eliot Ness (of course portrayed by Robert Stack) investigated the murder of a Chicago journalist (Untouchables).

### Chapter 3 RESEARCH AND RESULTS

A note on methodology:

Gibbons' stories from the *Chicago Tribune* were available from an online database accessible to students. This allowed me to download and save PDF copies of Gibbons' stories, as well as those cited from *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London. For *The World* of New York, *The New York Herald* and the *New York Evening Journal* I utilized microfilm rolls. In both cases, some copies were not sufficiently readable.

I generally focused on front-page stories. However that was not always possible as some noteworthy stories by Gibbons and his competitors were published on the inside pages of their newspapers. This was particularly the case when it came to Ireland.

Also, some basic background and contextual information on the events Gibbons reported on was taken from the online academic edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

The first mention of Floyd Gibbons in the *Chicago Tribune* (or rather the *Chicago Daily Tribune* as it was known then) was not in a byline. He was one of two people sued for libel in 1914 after a poem accusing the DeWitt, Ill., County attorney of being a hireling for the Illinois Central Railroad appeared in a strike newspaper, according to the Nov. 12, 1914, edition of the *Tribune*.

Gibbons apparently worked for the strike newspaper in one of his many breaks from working for the *Tribune*.

The paper never mentioned the outcome of the case, though younger brother Edward wrote it was later dismissed (53). Near the end, the story states, simply: “Mr. Gibbons is now a reporter for The *Tribune*.”

Indeed he was. At the time the story came out, Gibbons would have already been on his way to the U.S./Mexico border, where things were heating up. While it is safe to say the biggest national or international story in the United States at the time was the exploding war in Europe, the border was probably second, or at least in the top five, a review of national newspapers from the time shows.

Mexico in 1914 and 1915 was in a state of extreme unrest. Between 1910 and 1920, the country was in a civil war after 30-year dictator Porfirio Diaz was overthrown. Many factions battled for power, including one led by Francisco “Pancho” Villa. Alliances changed frequently (Mexican).

Much of the action took place in northern Mexico. Residents along the U.S. side of the border were very nervous. They had reason to be. By 1914 fighting was spilling across.

Major players in the saga included Jose Maytorena, governor of Sonora, Venustiano Carranza, leader of the Constitutionalists, who had declared himself president of Mexico 1914. Alvaro Obregon was a military commander under Carranza. After Carranza declared himself president, Villa began fighting against him (Mexican).

#### Gibbons in Mexico, December 1914 to June 1915

On Dec. 20, 1914, Gibbons had his first byline in the *Chicago Tribune*. He had filed it the day before from Naco, Ariz. It begins this way:

“Uncle Sam” is being crowded off his own back porch. United States citizens in this town are living in bombproofs. Their women and children are being quartered in the cement covered Church of St. Augustine.

Gibbons paints a vivid picture of a southwestern U.S. border town being turned into a fortress with rival Mexican armies squaring off in the desert just south of town. It is typical of much of Gibbons' swashbuckling Mexico coverage: Dramatic and aggressive.

Gibbons goes into detail on how Naco residents were dealing with the danger, dispositions of U.S. troops in the area, and the positions of the two opposing Mexican forces outside of town.

In what would also be a hallmark of Gibbons' reporting, he was not content to write a good color story from Naco. He ventured across the boarder to interview a Mexican commander.

The correspondent of THE TRIBUNE made a trip through the lines today to Gov. Maytorena's headquarters, four miles southeast of Naco. Cirilo Ramirez, special agent of Maytorena on the American side, accompanied the correspondent on the trip, which was made in the governor's dispatch automobile, which the Mexicans call a tin lizard.

Then later:

“It grieves me that this fight has incurred trouble for the United States,” Maytorena said. “I am doing everything in my power to prevent complications.”

Gibbons' next front-page story for the *Tribune*, published the day after Christmas, was about American troops watching the fighting from across the border. Most of them watched from atop rail cars.

These battle spectators were frequently interrupted by a bullet singing overhead or splintering the wooden side of the cars. Upon such occasions further observation

was conducted from protected positions or given up entirely in preference for the north sides of brick walls.

Gibbons' story ends with saying that Mexican soldiers in Naco believe that the U.S. military evacuated Vera Cruz the previous year because it faced annihilation.

This belief is encouraged by the fact that no punishment has been meted out for the fifty or more Americans killed and wounded in Naco, Ariz. Hence, the egotism and braggadocio of the Mexican common soldiers is at a point where it has become gall to the men in khaki.

This is not the last time Gibbons stereotypes foreigners. Some of his most important dispatches stereotype ethnic groups, even ones for which he appears to have felt a great deal of compassion for.

Gibbons was soon detailed to cover what was expected to be one of the hottest sporting events of 1915: The boxing match between Jess Willard and Jack Johnson in Juarez. Hardly alone among great news writers in that he did a lot of sports reporting early in his career (think A.J. Liebling, or Rick Bragg), Gibbons' color-writing skills were at times brought to bear on the sports page. In fact, his first bylined story after returning from Mexico that summer was an auto race in suburban Chicago. It was published June 27, 1915.

Ultimately, Gibbons did not cover the fight. It was held in Havana, not Mexico. Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion who had held the title since 1908, lost in the 24th round.

But Gibbons' time in Juarez bought him into contact with Pancho Villa, who controlled the area. Gibbons' stories on the expected fight were published inside the



paper. But in March, his story on his accompanying Villa's forces into battle appeared on the front page of the *Tribune*.

The March 24, 1915, story, "Villa Forces Ride as Wind to Wild Fight," describes a march and subsequent battle involving Villa's army. Gibbons starts the story with an easy-to-understand description of Villa's strategy and segues into a first person account of the march and the fight.

Gibbons' details of the sweltering, hungry, march are vivid.

Out on Agua Fria the pace began to tell on the horses. I noticed a number of animals played out by the roadside. A number of swollen bodies of dead horses bore evidence of the hurried flight of the Carranzistas two days before.

Instead of the pace becoming slower with the weariness of the men and the animals, it was increased. Across the valley on a road which ran along the foothills of the opposite mountains another column could be seen racing in the same direction as we were. The dust hanging above the cavalcade extended more than two miles.

As is the night battle in the town square.

A bugle sounded. It was the charge. Solomon shouted to me. Quirts hummed through the air, spurs jangled, bugles took up the call up and down the line. Every one yelled. The exhausted animals caught the fever and reared and plunged. The charge was on.

As far as I could find out, no one near our positions in the line had any idea what was being charged. I am sure I didn't. But apparently it was up ahead somewhere and that was the direction we plunged.

In the town the fighting intensifies. Gibbons' own horse panics, knocks down a door and storms through a house, knocking over furniture, winding up on a backyard porch. It was "the best maneuver of the battle," Gibbons writes, apparently because it took him out of the line of fire.

Villa's forces prevailed, and Gibbons had an eyebrow-raising first-person story.

Gibbons' next front-page story in the *Tribune* was published March 30. It was an account of a confrontational meeting between Villa and the Monterey chamber of commerce in which Villa blamed the rich for the plight of the poor and demanded repayment.

Senor Cantu, the president of the chamber of commerce, had recovered his composure by this time and took advantage of the pause.

“But my general,” he said, “much that you say is true. I wish to explain however, that the better class merchants – the men who belong to the chamber of commerce have not been guilty of the abuses that have been practiced on the poor.

“On account of the uncertainty of railroad transportation and the lack of guaranties on shipments these merchants have practically closed their shops and the high prices have been charged by the traveling peddlers who learned of the conditions here and shipped food in from other places and then charged the high prices that you –”

“You have helped – you have been responsible,” replied Villa, turning suddenly upon Cantu. “People of your kind should be shot. Get away from me.”

Villa also derided the 25 American, British, French and German chamber members, telling them that they were reaping the benefits of the country, and must obey the law.

The above incident was my first sight of Gen. Francisco Villa in action. It was action every minute of the time. When he hurled the epithets at the Mexican merchants many of them were as unprintable as they were sincere ... And I, who had been looking forward to a private interview, decided that the general's mood was not favorable and postponed the pleasure.

Gibbons does not say how he understood what Villa was saying. He did not speak Spanish. In most stories, though, Gibbons makes clear who did the translating.

Much of an April 11, 1915, Gibbons story is in unreadable condition now, but the story “Villa Troops Drive Enemy in Hard Battle” has examples of his colorful writing

and dialogue skills as he describes women attached to Villa's army, as they ask for information on their loved ones after the fight is over.

They sought to answer all the questions of the anxious ones. “For the love of the Virgin, señor, tell me my man Jose is safe!” cried one woman. Others plied similar questions concerning sons and husbands and sweethearts.

There were tears and sobs and sometimes curses when the answers were received. Some of the women cried for the dead, some for their sisters that were crying and others cried for the excitement of the moment as they handed oranges and water and eggs to the soldiers.

“The dogs, the dogs; they have shot all of mine!” an old wrinkled woman shouted to the accompaniment of oaths. I asked an English speaking Indian trainman how many sons the woman had lost. “Not sons,” he said, “they were her – what you call them? – her boarders. She cooked for five of them and they are all wounded and on the way to the hospital now.”

Gibbons was present at the battle of Celaya, an important battle in which Villa's forces were defeated, greatly stemming his influence. But you couldn't tell this from reading Gibbons' story.

General Francisco Villa apparently has completely surrounded the town ... By tomorrow morning Villa expects to have concluded the battle of Celaya with the capture of the town.

But a couple of things are worth noting. The *Tribune* at the time also carried stories that describe the battle as a Villa loss – datelined Laredo, Texas, and Washington, D.C. – that are not bylined. Also, there is a bit of wiggle room in Gibbons' language, with phrases like “apparently,” “it is believed” and “Villa expects.” Did he know what he was seeing, somehow letting his bosses know and then have it published in a way that was not traceable to him? Was work was being censored by Villa's people? Either way, *Tribune* readers at least got a somewhat accurate picture of what happened at Celaya, even if it did not come out of Gibbons' typewriter.

In a May 27, 1915, front-page story, “Worst Battle of Mexican War now at Height,” Gibbons acknowledges the defeat at Celaya and describes some of Villa's troops as “somewhat jarred” by the defeat. This story contains yet more examples of Gibbons' vivid prose. Here is Gibbons' lede paragraph:

Two parallel lines of steel fifteen miles long, eighty cannon, and 50,000 men charging and counter charging cross a plain strewn with dead and wounded. That is the present meeting of Gens. Villa and Obregon here in the once peaceful valley of the Rio de Leon.

At one point, Gibbons finds himself tending to Villa's wounded. Then he and the others come under artillery fire.

I must confess that without excuse I dropped to the ground behind the cactus, which would have given as much protection as so much pith. Around me I saw every man bend his knees and either drop flat on the ground or to his hands and knees. Even those wounded who were writhing in pain ceased their groans and tried to crouch.

A piece of shell then tore the hind leg off a pack mule standing fifty paces behind us and stampeded the horses. The doctor's assistant lost his horse in the stampede. I finished off the rest of my bandages in haste.

I felt sorry for the wounded remaining unattended, but will have to admit that the doctor's announcement that he had expended his store of bandages was a welcome one to me.

Gibbons returned to Texas about June 1. On June 3, the *Tribune* published a story by him titled “Mexico Wants Rescue by U.S.” in which, he essentially argues that Mexicans want the United States to enter the country and restore order. The article includes the sub-headline “Views of the People,” but the only sources Gibbons cites as supporting American intervention are ex Army officers now working for Villa.

Two weeks later the *Tribune* published a Gibbons story – buried deep inside this time – entitled “Mexican Hate of Gringo Real.”

They call it “The Gringo Hate.” It is a well named living, breathing thing, sometimes dormant, but never extinct. It is ever smoldering when it is not in flame. It never dies out. It is ever ready to rise up. It is admitted and recognized and cultivated.

That is the feeling Mexicans have toward Americans. For obvious reasons it does not appear in the diplomatic notes that reach Washington from the various revolutionary parties. On state occasions or in formal negotiations, especially where recognition by the United States is the desired object it is replaced by suave Latin politeness.

It may be said to the credit of the Mexican that he holds but little of the unreasonable prejudice against the Jew. The negro comes in for perfect equality among the lower classes. The chinaman is envied for his ability to save money and the Spaniard is disliked because he belongs to a nation that once ruled Mexico.

But the American is hated.

Gibbons goes into the history of the word “Gringo” and what Americans have done to anger Mexicans (basically practice economic imperialism). He also writes about a famine that is beginning to grip the republic.

It is an odd contrast with the earlier article that says Mexicans want intervention. It seems possible that in the earlier story, Gibbons was only saying that certain Villa followers wanted American intervention, and that was misunderstood by editors in Chicago, resulting in a bad headline being written. That may have meant a follow up explaining that the United States was unpopular in Mexico was in order.

Also in the *Tribune*, is photographic proof of Villa's admiration for Gibbons: A wooden rail car (though it hardly looks palatial) with Gibbons standing at the door. Painted on its side is “LA TRIBUNE, CHICAGO, ILL U.S.A. OFICINA PARTICULAR DE CORRESPONDAL ESPECIAL” (at least that's what it looks like, some of it is blurred)

Overall this is what can be said for Gibbons' Mexico coverage:

It is flashy and flamboyant. It is well written. It's exciting and written right from the battlefield. He also seems to have a lot of sympathy for Villa and his ideals. And the legend that Villa actually gave him his own rail car appears true, for a photo of it appeared in the *Tribune* on June 13, 1915.

And others envied it. His account of the battle of Celaya – accurate or not – was cited and reprinted by *The New York Herald* on April 11, 1915.

The most obvious drawback in his coverage is his apparent failure to immediately report Villa's defeat in that battle. This was one of the most important battles of this era in Mexico and Gibbons basically describes it as a success for Villa. Did Gibbons think it was in his best interest to appease Villa so he kept his mouth shut? Was he, in this incident, not in a position to see the battle accurately? There is no easy explanation.

How does Gibbons' coverage stack up against his competitors?

By and large, well. Of the national U.S. newspapers of the time, there is some nuanced, sensitive and informative coverage of Mexico. However, none of it has the personal and narrative flourish of Floyd Gibbons.

#### *The World on Mexico*

*The World* of New York City at the time is full of bright features and gay illustrations. It is also chock full of European War news, Zeppelin raids, and the labor riots in Roosevelt, N.J. But there is not much from Mexico. Stories on the country are buried inside with European war news up front.

There is a Dec. 10, 1914, story about 4,000 U.S. troops headed to Naco to “curb Mexicans” because they are shooting into town.

On Wednesday, Dec. 23, 1914, a *World* story, datelined Mexico City via El Paso, “US Capitalists tried to force Blanco on Mexico,” begins as such:

The bulk of the time and energy of Frank Rabb, United States Customs Collector for the Brownsville, Tex., district during the past four months has been devoted to efforts to manipulate Mexican politics with the object of making Gen. Lucio Blanco President of the Republic.

Robb has been acting as the representative of a syndicate of wealthy Texas businessmen and politicians...

Supporters of Rabb include Congressmen John Garner of the Brownsville district, the story says. Garner would later become Franklin D. Roosevelt's first vice-president.

Other noteworthy stories from Mexico in *The World* include:

A short item in the Jan. 4, 1915, edition about starving Mexicans crossing into Mexico at El Paso.

Then on Jan. 22, this more substantial, front-page, story: George C. Carothers of the U.S. State Department was shot by Villa, supposedly. The story is datelined El Paso and Villa officials there ridiculed the report, but then said they had no positive information. Washington cannot confirm Carothers was shot. For an unverified report, *The World* gave this major play.

On Jan. 30, in another El Paso story, the paper reported that a U.S. soldier from the 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was killed by a round fired from Mexico. U.S. authorities were expected to demand that Mexican authorities “punish the murderer.”

Feb. 13, the following appears: “Gen Villa Tells The World His Political Plans.” The story explains *The World* sent “one of its most trustworthy correspondents” – who is unnamed – to learn Villa's views and purposes. It was a struggle, but the reporter got the battlefield interview.

Like much of *The World's* coverage, it is datelined El Paso: It basically says Villa has “commenced a determined effort to win the recognition of the Government at Washington and to establish commercial and diplomatic relations with the United States.”

In an exclusive interview, Villa said the Mexican Civil War would be brought to a quick end if the United States would withdraw moral support from everyone except him. He would never agree to Carrenza being president. He supported the “hands off” policy of Washington, but disliked the seizure of Vera Cruz and was glad the Americans had left the city. Villa had a private train with telegraph and telephone cars and was in constant touch with his subordinate commanders.

On March 31, the paper publishes a dispatch similar to Gibbons' from Monterrey. “Villa Promises to Protect Foreigners; Calls Native Merchants Robbers.” Villa tells English, French, German and American dealers they are welcome, but must obey the law or leave. He calls Mexican merchants thieves. The story is datelined San Antonio, Texas. There is another smaller story out of Brownsville saying that Villa and Carrenza forces are clashing three miles south of Matamoros.

Many other stories on Mexico appear in *The World* at this time. Many are solid, datelined out of Mexico City or Washington, D.C., but even the handful from the Mexican interior where the fighting is lack the up close and personal touch of Floyd Gibbons.

So, basically in *The World* we have a mix of reliable and unreliable information, more reliable when they have someone on the ground inside Mexico, but that is not nearly as often as the *Chicago Tribune*. Like Gibbons' coverage, there is a touch of the



hysterical to it, but also aspects of reporting on the injustice of U.S. business interests as they relate to Mexico.

Give *The World* of 96 years ago credit: It was a lively newspaper. But the writing on Mexico is not as colorful as what Gibbons provided his paper, even if the *Tribune's* design was a bit more staid.

Clearly *The World* had talented people on staff. It's apparent star reporter at the time, Louis Siebold (the only byline that appears in the paper), was tied up in upstate New York, covering the libel case against former President Theodore Roosevelt, also a big story. How would the paper have done if it had sent Siebold to Mexico? It is hard to tell.

#### *The New York Herald on Mexico*

*The New York Herald* took a different take on the Mexican issue, foisting it on the front page more often than *The World*. It has a wide variety of stories from different parts of Mexico and the southwestern U.S., though not with the flair that Gibbons produced.

The term “front page,” is a bit flexible when referring to this newspaper at the time, as *The Herald's* first section was mostly advertising and some features. In this case, I mean its first big news page, which is laid out like a front page.

It seems to have more from-the-scene reporting than *The World* does. But like *The World* and unlike Gibbons' stories, their reports are not bylined.

On Dec. 2, 1914, there are reports of Villa, “at the head of 25,000 troops,” entering Mexico City. The story is datelined Mexico City, via Galveston, Texas. Another story, “Villa's Rise to Highest Power in Mexico Took Only Four Years,” is a biography of Villa.

The Dec. 16, 1914, edition had several stories from Mexico, and another datelined Washington, D.C., said more than 100 had been slain in Mexico City, one datelined El Paso said Villa's forces had taken Guadalajara and another datelined Naco, Ariz., said says Jose Maytorena, the governor of Sonora, had suspended his attack on Naco.

The next day, in another Naco-datelined story, the U.S. commander there, Brig. Gen. Tasker Bliss, declared that if one more shot was fired across the border from Mexico, the Americans would shoot back.

“The United States has reached all end of toleration in regard to the situation at Naco. If a single bullet comes into the United States either the Maytorena or Hill faction – and I shall be the judge from which faction it emanates – the United States will proceed to wipe that faction off the face of the earth.” This is a statement by Brigadier Gen. Tasker H. Bliss to Maytorena's representative. The conference was heated.

On Dec. 20, a Sunday, *The Herald* demonstrates that Gibbons is not the only aggressive reporter in southern Arizona.: In a story from Bisbee, Ariz., Maytorena tells the unnamed reporter he is optimistic over the situation in Naco. But he doesn't say much else.

On Dec. 26, like Gibbons, *The Herald's* reporter filed a story about how Naco was fired at all day.

On Sunday, Jan. 10, a story datelined Juarez, Mexico, the previous Wednesday, titled, “Those Constitutionlists are not Such A Bad Sort” is a second-hand story about how Constitutionlist soldiers surrounded the British Legation in Mexico City, and how Thomas Beaumont Hohler, first secretary and charge d' affaires of the British Legation in Mexico City, dealt with Constitutionlist troops who surrounded his legation and

demanded all its weapons. Hohler was too busy to bother with them because he is eating dinner, so they just went away.

On Jan. 20, a story from Mexico City (via El Paso) tells how Provisional President Roque Gonzalez Garza told the reporter he wanted to show the world that Mexicans are capable of creating peace and maintaining democracy.

On Sunday, March 21, is this story ran: “Not Ambitious for Presidency' General Villa Tells Herald.” It explains that Villa requested a *Herald* reporter to meet him in Torreon, Mexico, “because he wished to make a statement to the American people through *The Herald*.”

Villa told the unnamed *Herald* man that he wanted recognition from the United States. He said he is fighting for Mexico and not himself, and that he does “not possess a peso.”

It is basically one long statement by Villa. He praises President Wilson and denounces former President Theodore Roosevelt, saying if Roosevelt were still president it would be bad for both nations. He does not say why.

“A year and a half ago I crossed the border with only eight men,” said General Villa. “To-day you can see what I control. I have seven pianos like that one,” he said pointing to his electric piano. “I have private cars, trains, automobiles and rigs, but I have not used the nation's money to buy them. I have captured them from the enemy...”

And later:

On his arrival at Monterey General Villa immediately took up the matter of bettering the condition of the poor of the city, who were in a starving condition, as a result of the continued siege of the city. He placed orders for a trainload of corn, beans and meat, and this was hurried from Torreon by special train to be

distributed among the needy. He also levied a tax of one million pesos on the merchants for this relief work.

It is worth noting that Gibbons did not need an invitation from Villa. Then again, its obvious Villa is trying to play the press here.

On April 1, a story from Brownsville, Texas, predicts a battle for Matamoros across the border between the Carranza defenders and Villas forces “very soon.” U.S. troops are arriving in Brownsville.

On April 8, the paper reports they are fighting, and they are affecting the people of Brownsville.

A shower of bullets from the Mexican side fell into the residential section of Brownsville to-day during a sharp skirmish between Carranza and Villa troops before Matamoros and Americans had many narrow escapes.

An unnamed Brownsville official declares if a woman is hurt they will get an impromptu army together and drive the two forces out of range of Brownsville.

On Sunday, April 11, a front-page story cites Gibbons' dispatch from Celaya, as Obregon's forces being repulsed. We already know that was not true.

Overall, *The Herald* seems to do a solid job of thoroughly reporting Mexico. Again, not with the verve Gibbons brought to the *Tribune*. They published a lot of stories and had datelines from a variety of places, giving an issue of almost as much importance as the European War (for Americans, anyway) the space it was due.

*The New York Evening Journal on Mexico*

The *New York Evening Journal* did not spill a lot of front-page ink on Mexico. It had its share of bravado, like this Saturday, March 13, 1915, headline: “Mexicans Insult

the American Flag” about the slaying of an American at his home in Mexico City, with the stars and stripes flying above it. General Salazar, Emiliano Zapata's commander in Mexico City promised he would punish the troopers who killed an American man. A question of a financial reparation was “brushed aside before the graver question of the insult to the American flag and what is to be done about it.”

On March 27, the *Journal* reported the United States declined to force Mexico to apologize for dishonoring the flag in the McManus incident. Apparently the flag was more important than a life to the *Journal*.

*The Journal* had this interesting story on April 15: “Mexico to be Invaded From U.S.” by John W. Roberts, staff correspondent of the International News Service, Chihuahua, Mexico, datelined that day:

Mexico will be invaded from United States territory next month by a new Mexican Army which is being organized in Western Texas and Southern New Mexico. The new revolution is being backed by Generals Porfirio Diaz, Victoriano Huerta, Felix Diaz and the whole Cientifico party, composed of wealthy hacendados and members of the old Mexican aristocracy, all of whom have been driven out of the Mexican republic by General Villa.

Headquarters of the new revolutionary party have been established in New York and San Antonio. Washington knows of the plot and is acquiescent.

Roberts writes that an informant, who he will not identify, tipped him off. He then calls a Villa representative who says they know all about it.

On Saturday, May 15, the paper said 65 Americans had been killed at an American colony in Sonora by a band of 300 armed Yaqui. Some of the Americans are identified. The U.S. Navy ordered ships to defend the colony.

This can be said about the *Journal's* coverage of Mexico: It was sparse and full of Yankee nationalism. Some of this could be said about Gibbons as well, but he looks like a responsible citizen compared to those filing for the *Journal*.

Floyd Gibbons in France, January-June, 1918

World War I was a massive international conflict pitting the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey) against the Allies (mainly France, Great Britain, Russia, Japan, and, beginning in 1917, the United States). Wartime casualties are estimated 10 million dead, 21 million wounded, and 7.7 million missing or imprisoned (World).

By the end of 1914, Germany was facing off with two allied countries – Britain and France – in opposing lines of trenches that stretched across northern France. These trenches would not move much until the war ended in 1918.

In order to defeat Great Britain, Germany began a submarine campaign against merchant shipping around the British Isles. But the United States objected. The sinking of the liner *Lusitania* in 1915, an incident in which more than a thousand people – including 128 Americans – were killed, touched off a public outcry in the United States. Germany eventually backed off so as not to draw America into the war.

But as Germany's fortunes dimmed in early 1917, it announced it would resume unrestricted submarine warfare – essentially sinking ships on their way into Britain without warning.

Relations between the United States and Germany disintegrated. U-boats sent three U.S. merchant ships to the bottom March 16-18. Many died. The U.S. Congress

declared war in early April, though American troops would not be in combat in Europe for several months (World).

Gibbons would become one of the top U.S. reporters of World War I. He arrived in Europe after being torpedoed (and filing the most memorable piece of U.S. journalism of the war) and ended his time there by getting shot in the face and losing an eye in the pursuit of a dramatic story.

He reported from every conceivable arm of the service: The infantry, artillery, engineers, air corps and Marines.

Accounts of Gibbons exploits by authors like Taylor and Knightley say Gibbons chafed under the U.S. military's tight censorship appear accurate, because articles in the *Tribune* and the *New York Times* back then talk of Gibbons being arrested after breaking away from his minders and ensconcing himself in the first U.S. artillery battalion to fire at the Germans in 1917.

In the early part of 1918, Gibbons appears to be under the thumb of the censors though, because some of what he wrote was pretty standard, stripped of the dialogue and personality that characterized much of his reporting from Mexico.

But he managed to find opportunities for storytelling that others did not, even while being escorted around by Army minders.

On Feb. 2, 1918, the *Tribune* published a Gibbons account of being on an Army escorted tour of a U.S. outpost. Instead of a simple report from the front, this is what subscribers to the *Tribune* were able to read that morning:

With all lights out, cigarets tabooed and the siren silenced our overloaded motor slushed slowly along the shell pitted roads carefully skirting groups of

marching men and lumbering supply wagons that took shape suddenly out of the mist laden road in front of us.

Although it was not raining the moisture seemed to drip from everything and vapors from the ground, mixing with the fog overhead, almost obscured the hard working moon.

In the resultant grayness of the night the sense of sight and smell lost their keenness and familiar objects assumed unnatural forms, grotesque and indistinct.

We approached the engineers' dump, where the phantoms of fog gradually materialized into helmeted and khaki figures that moved in knee deep and carrying boxes and planks and bundles of tools. Total silence covered all the activity and not a ray of light revealed what mysteries of the mist had been worked here in surroundings that seemed no part of this world.

Gibbons and his fellow correspondents are given a nighttime tour of the trenches.

As we silently considered the various eventualities immaterial the prosecution of the war, but not without personal concern, our progress was brought to a sudden standstill.

“Huh-huh-halt!” came a drawn out command in a husky, throaty stammer weaker than a whisper, from an undersized, tin-hatted youngster planted in the center of a trench not ten feet from us. His left foot was forward and his bayoneted rifle was held ready for a thrust.

“Huh-huh-huh-halt!” came the nervous, whispering command again, although we had been motionless since the first whisper.

We heard a click as the safety catch on the man's rifle lock was thrown off and the weapon made ready to discharge. The major was watching the nervous hand that rested none to steadily on the trigger stop. He stepped to one side but the muzzle of the gun followed him.

“Huh-huh-huh-halt, I tuh-tuh-tell you.”

This time the whisper vibrated with nervous tension and there was no mistaking the state of mind of the sentry.

“Take it easy,” replied the major with attempted calm. “I'm waiting for you to challenge me. Don't get excited. This is the commanding officer.”

“What is the countersign?” came from the voice in a laird strain.

“Troy,” the major said, and the word seemed to bring worlds of reassurance to the rifleman who sighed with relief but forgot to move his rifle until the major said:

“Will you please take that gun off me and put the safety back in?”

“The nervous sentry moved the gun six inches to the right and the correspondents all standing behind the major looked into something that seemed as big as the LaSalle street tunnel...

“There is no occasion to get excited,” the major said in a fatherly tone. “I'm glad to see you are wide awake and on the job. Don't feel any fears for your



job and just remember that with that gun and bayonet in your hands you are better than any man who turns that trench corner or crosses our there....”

The writing paints a picture of what life in the trenches was like. Gibbons conveys the sense of fear one must have felt being in the trenches.

In a story published Feb. 10, 1918, “Heavy Guns Pound German Lines,” Gibbons shows off his sense of humor.

The artillery again is having its day on the American front. In pursuit of some accidental pacifist policy, apparently a mutual liking by the opposing infantry, the front lines seem to have laid off the strenuous rifle work and they now manifest a liking for the less arduous work performed with the pick and the shovel. The black faced patrols still haunt “No Man's land” at night but cases of interference have not been reported in the last week.

All of this seems to please the artillery, which, to its own phrase, is “whanging away” night and day.

A story published Feb. 24, 1918, “U.S. Soldiers Hold Line on Famous Field,” includes a lot of the pro-American bravado Gibbons was sometimes guilty of, but also vivid descriptions of an infantry battalion's quarters in a quarry, citing a French General at the scene:

“They are like the pure [unreadable] thoroughbred racer, prancing and eager for the start. They have mettle. I have seen no finer body of men.... In spite of the fact their training has not been as thorough as that of the organization now on the line they are quite up on their toes and ready to go.”

Much of Gibbons' reporting between February and May seems unremarkable. It is at this time, according to a *Tribune* account published at the time of his wounding, he really chafed under the censors' restrictions.

But on May 11, 1918, a decent story: “America's Men Hold Back Foe Before Amiens,” some fast-paced writing:

Hurriedly abandoned villages now occupied by troops once more mute tales of the homeless. Villagers, old men, old women, and children have recently fled, driving before them their cows and farm animals even as they themselves have been driven back by the rain of German shells. In their deserted cottages remain fresh traces of their departures and the ruthless severing of home ties generations old.

But really, things took off for Gibbons in the battle in which he was wounded. On June 8, the *Tribune* published an account of his injury by Newton C. Parke of the International News Service, then under it what was almost Gibbons' last dispatch:

WITH THE AMERICANS ON THE MARNE, June 6, – [Delayed] The American line [unreadable] of the Marne in the region to the northwest of Chateau Thierry. Since [unreadable] o'clock this morning our infantry has been going forward wiping out nests of German machine guns and consolidating new positions. The enemy has steadily given way before the persistent pressure of our troops. We have taken 200 prisoners today, including one officer. As is the case of the recent hard fighting, the American line lay roughly through Les Mares farm just north of the village of Lucy le Bocage. On through the outskirts of the town of Triangle.

The story ends this way:

In this fighting and struggle of the last three days much credit redounds to the United States marines, who have been steadily in the first line. An indication of the speed with which your men have thrown themselves into battle came from the captain of an ammunition truck train, who told me that in order to keep up with the advancing line it became necessary for him to lead his loaded camions up within 500 yards of the Germans in daylight and unload the iron rations.

On June 8, 1918, a biography of Gibbons was displayed on Page 3, lauding him as one of the best newspapermen of his age:

When Ring Lardner was in Europe a few months ago, Gibbons told him of a correspondent's discouragements under the strict censorship in trying to get news home.

“I'm getting sick of it,” Gibbons said. “My Laconia experience has convinced me that all that is left for me to do is pull some sensational stunt, and I'm going to do it. I'm going over the top with the boys at the first opportunity.”

He probably “pulled his stunt.” That’s doubtless the reason he is now stretched on a cot in a Paris hospital.

What probably sealed the reputation of the Marines, though, was likely not Gibbons’ story, as Randall and others describe, but his statement to a fellow *Tribune* journalist, who interviewed him on his hospital bed. Gibbons said he was rushing to the aid of a wounded officer when he was hit.

M.E. Murphy quotes Gibbons as singing the Marine’s praises.

“Those marines are wonderful, perfectly wonderful,” he said. “Nothing could stop them. They went over the top four times in the afternoon under a perfect storm of machine gun fire and drove the Germans before them. They set their bayonets and went to it like they had been used to it all their lives and cleaned out nest after nest of machine guns with which the woods seemed alive.”

The last story from the front written by Gibbons and published by the *Tribune* was filed prior to his wounding. Before Gibbons was with the Marines, he was attached to a group of U.S. troops that marched into Alsace – prewar German territory. “How Yankees Took Over Line in Foe’s Land” was published June 17, and shows Gibbons didn’t need a particularly dramatic event to write well.

A pale moon hanging high over the Swiss Alps looked down on marching groups of United States soldiers moving along winding mountain roads bordered or shaded by pine trees as trim, verdant, and conical as painted wooden imitations of the real thing.

Later, the men are told they have moved into an area the Germans have long considered theirs.

Upon the sound of the rest order a buzz of interested voices rose as the platoon took a new inventory of its surroundings. One man picked a handful of dust from the broad way and there it in the air. Another spat violently and

accompanied the act with a violent remark. A third went to the roadside and picked a small white flower. This he placed between a letter and a photograph in a notebook and deposited it in his left breast pocket.

“Doesn't feel so bad to be in Dutch, does it,” remarked one.

“If the kaiser knew it he'd have us arrested,” said another.

“When he finds it out he will be so mad he will bust his mainspring in the watch on the Rhine,” was another contribution.

Gibbons work was clearly of star quality. But many of his stories from this period are unremarkable. They are quite competently written, but not examples of his best work. Gibbons expressed frustration with the U.S. censorship apparatus at this time according to a biographical account published in the *Tribune* after his wounding, and it is possible that with officialdom's leash around his neck, he may not have been able to fully exercise his talents as an on-the-scene storyteller.

Still, much of his work is great. What stands out about them are his excellent skills using dialogue – rare for newspapermen then and now – and his aggressiveness for getting to the heart of a story. But most of his writing seems cheerleading and very pro-American.

How about others?

*The New York Evening Journal in France in early 1918*

*The Journal* utilized the International News Service for its coverage of the war during this time period. As William Randolph Hearst owned both organizations this is not terribly surprising. It was wire copy, and none of it had the zing or personalization of Gibbons' best stuff.

A typical story, written by Newton C. Parke, was published Feb. 2: “American Shells Rout Germans” was displayed in huge type across the top.

Another enemy raid on the American lines was successfully forestalled when machine gun and artillery fire routed several Germans whose skulking forms were seen though the mist across No Man's Land...

Another example is this one, "Pound Foe's Positions to Bits" by Henry G. Wales, on Feb. 27:

Three Americans were killed and nine were wounded in German gas attacks on the American lines this morning. Sixty gas drums and twenty-five high explosives were sent toward the American trench at half-past one o'clock this morning and again at two o'clock. The American infantry stood by to repel the attack, which did not materialize.

Then in the third paragraph: "American artillery promptly pulverized the gas apparatus and the emplacement, as photographs made later from airplanes revealed."

There are some dramatics: "N.Y. Lieutenant, Dying, Strangles Foe" on May 18.

Lieutenant James Pellache, Harvard, '19, son of a New York artist, is dead after a gallant fight, in which though mortally wounded, he strangled a German giant in a fierce tussle in No Man's Land.

Leading an infantry patrol, Pellache encountered a German working party and a fight at close quarters ensued. Pellache was shot in the head, but with a fractured skull, and despite terrible loss of blood, he put the big German with whom he clashed out of business, and he and his men defeated the enemy with their fists and pistols.

This works for an evening newspaper. Imagine a reader coming home after a hard day of work, picking the *Journal* off his porch, sitting in a rocking chair before dinner, and reading something that was released that day. A reader would be unlikely to critique its straight delivery. It was probably breathtaking back then to read such accounts the day they happened.

Many of the INS reporters were pretty accomplished. Wales wrote the definitive account of the execution of Mata Hari.

But time and time again they fail to take advantage of storytelling opportunities the way Gibbons did. In the case of the *Journal*, it may simply be because of the reliance on the INS. Wire service work tends to force people to write fast and move on to the next thing. And because most of the action it reported on happened the morning the paper was published, speed was essential.

#### Floyd Gibbons in Ireland, September and October, 1919

Political turmoil in Ireland had been festering for several years by the end of World War I. The violent squelching of the 1916 Easter Rising inflamed nationalist sentiment, and in the 1918 elections, pro-independence political party Sinn Fein won 73 of the 105 Irish seats in the British Parliament. In a January, 1919, meeting in Dublin, Sinn Fein members of Parliament declared themselves the parliament of an Irish republic, and began operating as a provisional government (Sinn).

A guerrilla war, known as the Irish War for Independence, followed. Both sides agreed to a truce in 1921. The subsequent Anglo-Irish Treaty led to the creation of the Irish Free State (Ireland).

In late 1919, Gibbons was dispatched to Ireland from his base in Paris at Chicago's request. Every story he wrote from Ireland was published inside the paper, no matter how good.

Gibbons was a practicing Roman Catholic of Irish decent (Seldes 207). His stories contain a definite pro-Irish bent. He was not alone in American journalism of favoring one side over the other.

His first story from Ireland during the conflict was published in the *Tribune* on Sept. 27, 1919.

In a page two story on Sept. 29, "English Try to Crush U.S. Trade with Erin; Hide Under American Names; Tax Goods Direct," Gibbons uses a letter, apparently leaked to him, plus a ration of statistics. He also interviews an Irish businessman, but not an English one:

Material American interests are becoming more involved every day as the British government and powerful English business organizations apply newer and more stringent measures in the handling of the Irish question.

When the Daily Erean with the backing of 80 per cent of the Irish businessmen announced its polity of endeavoring to transfer its trade with England to America, English firms were quick to feel the cut. Normal trade between Ireland and England in 1914 amounted to over \$500,000,000 and at present England is not prepared to stand this loss with a smile. ...

A case in point which I can state would indicate this policy on the part of English commercial interests has already gone so far as to reach out and to make an extra tax on holy candles which Irish worshipers burn on their altars as they pray for better days for Ireland.

In a story published Oct. 5, 1919, "British Censor Gone, But Spirit Still Clings to Erin," Gibbons writes how officially there are no rules as to what an Irish newspaperman can publish, but a paper can still be seized post-publication under the Defense of the Realm Act. His story mostly outlines the specific aspects of the law.

In "Overrode Law in Suppressing Irish Congress," published Oct. 7, Field Marshall French, the governor of Ireland, broke the law, according to a coded message

obtained by Sinn Fein and then given to Gibbons. The copy is faded so it's had to say exactly why.

I am able to reproduce the text of some of the cipher correspondence now in the hands of the Sinn Fein. The means by which the secret messages were obtained is not revealed, but this is not difficult to imagine in a country where 80 per cent of the people have registered their opposition to the king's government by an overwhelming vote against it.

Gibbons does not explain how the cipher was decoded, but repeats it verbatim.

Gibbons' best reporting feat from Ireland is his interview with Robert Barton, an Irish member of the British parliament after he broke out of Mount Joy Prison in downtown Dublin. Barton had been arrested earlier that year for making seditious speeches.

Gibbons found him by bumping into him at a dinner party. Someone else explains that he is a fugitive MP. Gibbons writes in a story published Oct. 9 that he was flummoxed.

Plainly, the incongruity was unnoticeable to all save me at the table, because the conversation had progressed to salad before further reference was made to the circumstances was made in a manner that would afford me any enlightenment. The atmosphere was such that inquiries on the criminal record of one's table mate seemed tabooed matter.

Later:

It's a strange sensation to feel you are sitting next to a habitual criminal and watch him calmly sprinkling paprika on his salad while any minute the hand of the law is liable to fall upon him.

The next day, the story was of Gibbons and Barton chatting next to a peat fire, as Barton described how he was elected.



In the Oct. 11 story, Barton told Gibbons how he escaped prison. Most of the story is a straight dictation of Barton's words, but Gibbons sets the piece up well.

His lede:

The American moving picture director seeking types for the part of a jailbreaker would never accept Robert Barton on the cast. The Irish member of parliament and minister of agriculture for the republic of Ireland looks anything but a man capable of sawing prison bars and scaling walls. Listening to the story of the first escape from Mount Joy prison one became aware of the unfitness of his appearance for the job. In fact, it was a contradiction.

Gibbons followed that up with a story on Oct. 12 about how difficult an Irish policeman's job was. He may be Irish, but was basically an agent of the British government and considered a traitor by Sinn Fein and many of the Irish people.

The story lacks interviews with actual police officers – they may have feared reprisals, for as Gibbons says, “they are frequently shot down in the dark” – but the story is still solid.

It is the most lonesome place in the world for policemen, because nobody will speak to them. Nation wide ostracism, almost as though as endured by a leper, prevails in almost every section of the country. Policeman O'Grady no more touches his hat and says “Top of the morning” to Mrs. Muldoon as she passes on her way to mass, for the simple reason O'Grady knows Mrs. Muldoon will only look through and pass him as though he were thin air.

One cannot help but feel sorry for the Irish policeman after reading this story.

Other Gibbons Ireland stories include an Oct. 13 story about how the British and Irish disagreed on the name of a street. Was the main thoroughfare of Dublin named Sackville Street, as the English called it, or O'Connell Street, as the Irish called it? He interviewed several people on both sides of the argument.

On Oct. 14, his story was from Belfast. He reported that people in Ulster hate Catholicism and don't want to leave Great Britain. Later that month he covered Sinn Fein as it met in defiance of English authorities, and covered a slightly more legal meeting of Dail Eireann, the Irish congress, as British authorities watched carefully.

Gibbons' stories from Ireland definitely demonstrate a pro-Independence sympathy by Gibbons, demonstrated by his writings on economic issues and the Defence of the Realm Act. But he did actually travel to Ireland to report on the situation, and made obvious attempts to be fair to both sides, and did not portray the English in a one-sided manner. The same can't be said for other papers.

*New York Evening Journal* coverage of Ireland, late 1919

Gibbons' coverage is a model of fairness compared to that of the *New York Evening Journal*, which was stridently pro-Irish in September and October of 1919.

The paper ran several columns by Eamon de Valera in its news pages, referring to him as the "Irish President," a term some might have argued with as Ireland was not universally recognized as independent at the time. He was, rather, a revolutionary figure (no one can argue that de Valera didn't *eventually* become president of Ireland). De Valera's columns described Ireland's vast water power, complained that the British had stripped it of its trees and were restricting its trade and committing genocide.

The paper also published an unbylined story on Sept. 22, 1919, about how two Irish organizations complimented Hearst newspapers (like the *Journal*) for their stand for Irish independence.

There is some actual journalism. On Sept. 25, “England's Irish Policy Debated in Cabinet” by L. R. Murdoch of the Universal News Service. The headline well-summarizes this news story. Below that a small item saying the British had seized three more Irish newspapers and taken apart their presses.

On Monday, Sept. 29, in the story “U.S. Citizen Tells How British Mistreated Him,” an Irish-American tells of his arrest in the Easter Rebellion and imprisonment in London.

In retrospect, it's hard to criticize the *Journal* for having such a pro-Irish-independence stand. New Yorkers had several newspapers to choose from. A pro-English bias was not hard to find – like in the pages of the *New York Herald*.

The New York Herald and Ireland, September and October, 1919

As much as the *New York Evening Journal* was pro-Irish-independence, *The Herald* was in the opposite camp. The paper ran columns in its news pages by Truman H. Talley, one of its London correspondents, who were not necessarily against Irish independence as much as they were against Sinn Fein.

The datelines on Talley's stories indicate in this time, he was reporting from the offices of *The Herald's* bureau on Fleet Street in London, not from Dublin, like Gibbons.

On Sept. 22, 1919, this Talley article from London appeared: “Sinn Fein's True Methods Practiced on All Classes, Mr. Talley's Inquiry Shows.” This is an obviously anti-Sinn Fein article that says, “The real sufferers from Sinn Fein are the Irish People.”

However much England is to blame for Ireland's plight today, England's fault has been on the side of omission, while Sinn Fein's has been one of commission.

It outlines what it describes as the intimidation, injury and murder of Irish citizens whose duties bring them into conflict with Sinn Fein.

To begin with, there were several citizens, including a Catholic priest, whose disapproval of Sin Fein had brought on outrages of varying severity. An Irish farmer who favored conscription suffered malicious injury to property....

Next to this, is a reprint of the declaration of the Irish Republic from 1916, and points out its references to its "Allies in Europe." By this, he means the Germans.

The next day, *The Herald* published an article by Talley about how the criminals of Ireland are copying Sinn Fein.

Talley's screeds are clearly his opinions and not straight news articles. And while writing articles about how Sinn Fein is evil, he also wrote about subjects like the British rail strike.

Talley would later leave *The Herald* and become a producer for Fox Movietone News and produce an Oscar-nominated documentary (Truman). He was hardly a loser. But one wonders how the readers of *The New York Herald* benefitted by his opinion pieces in *The Herald's* news pages. While there is some actual reporting in his stories, and he writes of things that happened in Ireland when he's been there, his journalism suffers from an overt bias against the revolutionaries.

Gibbons reporting from Ireland in 1919 is worthy of criticism. But on the whole, it brought a difficult and controversial story to life for *Tribune* readers. Though Gibbons stories seemed to favor the Irish cause, his stories captured the human dimension of the conflict, and he never resorted to writing pro-Irish screeds.

Floyd Gibbons in Russia

The 1921 famine in Russia was an incredible catastrophe that killed more than 5 million people. War and political turmoil in the previous years had made life difficult for the peasants, and the new Soviet government required them to surrender all of their grain not needed for food or seed. Also, they were prevented from selling it on the open market. The result: Peasants began to reduce the acreage they sowed. Grain production plummeted.

A drought in early 1921 made a bad situation even worse. It triggered a massive famine, affecting 30 provinces. At its height, some 35 million were malnourished. Many ate grass. The disaster would have been more severe if not for the American Relief Administration headed by Herbert Hoover (Union).

Gibbons first story from inside the Soviet Union was datelined Moscow and published on Aug. 21: "1,600 Moscow Churches Pray for Famine Aid." It describes how Moscow is affected by the famine, though much of life goes on as normal. There is some good descriptive writing here.

Maimed soldiers, crippled on crutches and beggars in rags were lined up in front of the churches asking alms. Old men and women carrying trays sold chunks of black bread, a few white rolls, apples, plums, pears and eggs, along the streets.

On Aug. 23, the *Tribune* ran a Gibbons story called "Russia Appeals for Peace and Trade with U.S." with the sub headline, "Plea Sent to Nation Through *Tribune*." The Soviet minister of foreign affairs handed Gibbons a written statement pleading for help and good relations with the United States. Most of the article is Gibbons' quoting the minister through his letter or in an interview.

And on Aug. 30, came the big story from Samara: The phrase “4 Horsemen Ride In Russia” was plastered right under the masthead of the *Tribune*.

SAMARA ON THE VOLGA, Russia, Aug. 25 – (Delayed) – “God says the bottom of the granaries should never be seen,” runs an old legend of the Volga fisherfolk – but seven years of war and waste have bared the floors of the grain bins even to the cracks, from which hungry fingers have picked the last seeds and specks of food dust, and today life is dear and hard and death is cheap in Samara, the heart of the famine area.

Here in the railroad yards, woe, sickness, hunger, misery, and death are rampant....

By boat, by train and by caravans, this pilgrimage of starving hordes has reached this place from all points. Some have come down the river from Kazan. Thousands have come from the south, from the famine regions of Saratof and Tzaritzin, on the Volga, and some even from Astrakhan on the Caspian sea.

They have come from Persia and India and from the Urals and Turkestan. They represent all the breeds of human animals from light haired Finns of the Siberian steppes to swarthy Turks and slant eyed Mongolians. They speak a myriad of tongues and wear all kinds of rags, patches, robes, hats, turbans and boots.

Gibbons traces the recent history of Russia, explaining many were uprooted from their farms during World War I.

He also describes the burial of a baby. And this scene:

A boy of 12 with a face of 60 was carrying a 6 months old infant who was wrapped in a filthy bundle of furs. He deposited the baby under a freight car, crawled after him and drew from his pocket five fish heads, which he chewed ravenously, and then bringing the baby's lips to his he transferred the sticky paste of half masticated fish scales and dry bones to the infant's mouth, the same as a mother bird feeds her young.

Though this particular Gibbons story is rarely republished like his *Laconia* story is, that particular passage can easily be found. No matter how many times it is read, it remains an upsetting image.

Gibbons cites statistics, but admits they are unreliable, as to the numbers of starving.

He ends the story this way:

In this land, where the customs and manners seem like biblical illustrations, the same as the Volga boats look like those of old Galilee, into this land there can come only one hope, and that is the good samaritan from across the sea.

Few anthologies include Gibbons' story. They should. Not only is it great writing – the whole piece is united by biblical themes – it is the product of clever and industrious reporting.

It is also a piece of advocacy journalism. The writer is clearly pleading to his countrymen to help Russia.

Gibbons' next front-page story was published Sept. 1: “Lifeless Town Tells Tragedy of Russ Famine” is another heartbreaking story. Gibbons visits a village and leads with this:

Here is a village of living death. We first saw it from the distance of a mile when our careening droskies emerged from a silent pine woods and plunged hub deep into sand and chuck holes in the snakelike Russian road winding across a rolling plain of bare, blackened fields over which hungry crows flapped and cackled.

Gibbons stops in at a random house and finds a woman who lost her husband.

“We shall all follow him soon,” she continued. “We sit and wait and grow weaker every day. We have hunted long for food – there is no more. We have eaten grass, straw, weeds, the bark of trees and roots and we still eat these things that we never would have fed to our cattle – but there is no food in them. Here is our bread”

She produced a damp black chunk of sour smelling punk from which protruded wisps of straw and green and yellow chunks of fiber.

He also interviews a doctor assigned to the village by the Soviets. There is nothing he can do, he says, for the people need food, not medicine. "I have been ordered to remain, so I expect to die with them, and I do not think that my death is more than a month away..." he tells Gibbons.

The last sentence in the story is a quote from the doctor: "God pity us."

Gibbons next page one story on Russia ran two days later. In it, he predicts a million Russians are doomed to die, no matter what actions the United States takes to help. He is up front in that his prediction is based on his own observations, but also cites statistics provided by the Soviet government.

Last year's harvest yield was only about 216 pounds per person, which was the lowest on record. In the famine year 1891 the crop amounted to about 288 pounds per person and the famine crop of 1897 yielded about 339 pounds per person. On Sept. 24, the *Tribune* published Gibbons' last front page famine story, "First

Yankee Food in Kazan, Famine Hub." It basically just describes the distribution.

"Dladuska" is the name which the hungry children called out to the newly arrived Americans. American relief administration cars with Russian signs on their sides carried news of their presence and purpose and this information spread like wildfire. A small crowd gathered at noon when Vernon Kellogg, Herbert Hoover's deputy, and other American officials presented themselves before M. Mulhtaroff, prime minister.

Gibbons feat is well documented by journalism historians. Did anybody get close to what Gibbons did here?

Walter Duranty of *The New York Times*

Walter Duranty does much of the coverage of the issue for the publication that, at the time, was fast becoming America's paper of record. This was the assignment that took



him to Russia, and ultimately got him the job of Moscow correspondent, which he rode to both glory and infamy.

But in this context, it doesn't seem as if he does too badly, though like everyone else Gibbon's outclasses him.

The *Times* runs two Gibbons' stories from Russia in this time period, most likely because Gibbons got to the right places first. But then, Duranty and the *New York Times* do a better job than *The Times* of London.

Duranty started out in Riga and provided some detailed accounts of the negotiations there. Then he traveled to Moscow.

On Aug. 27, *The Times* published a story from Duranty, datelined Moscow, that other than some context provided by Duranty, was one long description of the suffering in the famine region by a relief official that had just been published in Moscow, with descriptions similar to what Gibbons wrote. The account lacks Gibbons' literary flair, and Duranty was not in Samara, but it is an actual account of the famine published in an American newspaper before Gibbons' Samara account was published in the *Tribune*.

On Aug. 30, Gibbons' Samara account is published on Page 2. On page 1, Duranty continues with secondhand anecdotes from Moscow, and explains why the famine is happening, including seven years of war, indiscriminate requisitions by the Red and White Russian forces, prolonged drought from April until June that ruined crops, and a plague of locusts and epidemics.

On Sept. 5, a story by Duranty from Samara is published. In “Russia's Children Left to Their Fate,” he focuses on the young, but he is not quite the the writer Gibbons is.

There is a movement and a little whimper, like a new-born puppy's. Something rises from the dust. It is a boy about twelve, wearing a long braided coat whose collar still bears the badges of the smart academy of which it was once the uniform...

Imagine arms no wider than rulers and so emaciated that hanging limply by the boy's sides they look as thin as a ruler's edge. The fingers are positively no fatter than a good-sized match, for I compared them. The little triangular face is shrunk to the size of a woman's hand and the blue eyes are utterly disinterested. The body may weigh fourteen pounds – just skin tense over the wasted little skeleton.

The next day, another page one story in the times from Samara, about starving peasants coming from the countryside. He visits a woman in a nearby village who only has green colored cakes to feed her family, having made them from grass, leaves and chopped melon rind.

Overall, Duranty lacks Gibbons' literary abilities and like everyone else, got beat on this story. His biographer, S.J. Taylor, called it correctly when she said Duranty's coverage was far more emotionally distant from what was going on around him than Gibbons' was.

#### Russia Stories from *The Times* of London

*The Times* does not cover itself in glory on this one. Much of its coverage seems specifically designed to discredit the Soviet government. The paper has an unnamed correspondent in Riga that provides updates on the negotiations there in August, but apparently does not board the train with the bulk of the foreign journalists (like Duranty)

to travel to Moscow. So unlike the *New York Times* and the *Tribune*, the *London Times* generally relies on reports from places like Helsinki and Warsaw.

Examples of their anti-Soviet bias include a number of small stories published Sept. 10, with headlines like “Soviet Abuse” and “Making Profit out of the Famine.”

What the *London Times* does do is publish a six-part series of articles from “a competent observer” who traveled in the famine region and recently returned. These stories do not start on the news pages, but on the editorial pages. There is lots of description, but it is long and rambling.

On Sept. 14:

I watched one old man, a mixed type, running off to where a few women and boys and an assortment of bundles represented his people and possessions in the midst of the general crowd and chaos ... His sons, mild, smiling boys, whose faces had the almost idiotic, half-witted look of peasant youths who have been thrown out of their usual environment, grappled with others of the heavy bundles...

On Sept. 15:

We drove on through the wilderness and met occasional evidence of the effects that the disaster is having upon the peasants and their stock. We frequently came upon carcasses of horses and cows picked clean to the bone, but whether by famished people or by the crows that were flying overhead or by both, we could not tell. Then along the road came a little party of unfortunates. A thin, old, bearded peasant was tugging between the shafts of his cart, in which were piled three or four emaciated and pockmarked children and a few domestic chattels and bundles of cloth and rags. Behind, an old woman and a youth were exerting their little remaining strength in the attempt to push the cart. It was clear what had happened. The horse with the family had started out from their village had died by the way, and now they had to take the place themselves. They did not make any sign as we passed them; in their faces there was neither resentment or pleading, but only despair.

This came two weeks after Gibbons and a week after Duranty filed similar reports. It is better than nothing.

## CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this thesis, I expected to find Gibbons to be, as author and editor David Randall found him, “outwardly flinty, trusting almost no one, and with a rat-like nose for his own advantage, he seems a man easier to admire at a distance than to know close-up.”

That does not seem to be true. Gibbons' skillful manipulation of newsroom politics might indeed mean he had a rat-like nose for his own advantage. His willingness at the pre-World War I *Chicago Tribune* to jump to other papers, or to public relations, for a short time if he wasn't getting what he wanted shows an incredible cockiness and savviness when it comes to those matters.

But that's not the end of it. He excelled at zeroing in on human suffering, such as the ostracized Irish police officer or the starving Russian peasant. He was also quite personable, able to get along with and gain the respect of fellow journalists, military officers, Pancho Villa, Soviet bureaucrats; a whole host of people, really.

Gibbons' byline actually meant something. A byline was a rare thing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The byline was, in many ways, an acknowledgement that pure objectivity was not really possible, which is probably why they became more common in the years after the war.

Some journalists, like Talley, used their byline to write what we would today call an opinion column in the news pages. For others, like the reporters for the INS and many

newspaper reporters today, the byline might as well have not been there, for there was little to separate what they wrote from the other coverage of the war.

But Gibbons' style was distinctly human. He told the story of what he was seeing from his perspective, frequently using the first person. But he didn't use his byline to spout off. His approach was to tell the reader what he was seeing as he rode with Pancho Villa, or toured the trenches, or walked the streets of Dublin.

Gibbons actually seems to have gotten along with his colleagues. Many, like George Seldes, wrote complimentary things about him long after he was dead. Gibbons credited the plan of getting into Russia in 1921 to Seldes. But in his autobiography, *Witness to a Century*, Seldes does not mention this in his chapter on the Russian famine. Gibbons in this situation strove to make sure someone who worked for him got some of the credit for his success.

And why should Gibbons have been a jerk? The history of journalism is filled with self-centered people with sharp elbows to be sure, but some of its finest practitioners have taken it upon themselves to help other reporters. Homer Bigart did that with the younger generation of war correspondents in the early years of the Vietnam War and Meyer Berger took time out of his day to help out the newest reporters in the *New York Times* newsroom. People like Arthur Gelb, A.M. Rosenthal and Gay Talese benefitted from Berger's mentorship.

Gibbons may very well be the best story getter American journalism has ever produced. By story getter, I do not mean that Gibbons was a hard-hitting investigative journalist like Bob Woodward, Ida Tarbell or Lincoln Steffens.

Send Bob Woodward out to find the news and he is going to come back with the news, with information powerful people do not want you to know.

Floyd Gibbons would come back with a *story*.

Gibbons' work, often in the first person, is replete with narrative, dialogue, quotes, and imagery. Many others of his day wrote good, and sometimes even dramatic, reports of news events. But Gibbons brought these events to life for readers back in the United States.

He had an incredible sense of the absurd – his horse scaring up and crashing through a family home in Mexico during a battle, British and American high rollers partying on the *Laconia* as they were being torpedoed by a German submarine, and being at a dinner party where a guest is a member of parliament, who also happens to be a fugitive.

Gibbons was also a great reporter. He clearly had the ability to politic his way into the confidence of powerful people (like Pancho Villa), and also was able to quickly gain the trust of the Sinn Fein in Ireland. There for less than two weeks, Irish revolutionaries were already slipping him information that he was turning into stories and introducing him to important people.

How did he get himself into these kinds of situations? He was an extreme personality. He was not normal.

Most normal people – even risk takers like foreign correspondents – aren't willing to change their reservation to a ship that is likely to get torpedoed in order to get a juicy story, or go over the top alongside U.S. Marines, or storm into a foreign army's

headquarters in a uniform with dog-show medals pinned to it and demand access to the front. Normal people don't tell Soviet bureaucrats that they are entering Russia whether they like it or not, and it is in their best interest to cooperate with him. This is not normal.

And people who aren't normal tend to find themselves in extreme situations – the kind of situations that produce news stories. What normal person suddenly finds themselves sitting at a dinner party with a member of parliament who is on the lam? Floyd Gibbons, apparently.

Gibbons did not magically fall out of the sky with a genius for journalism. He was heavily influenced by some of his fellow journalists early in his career. Gibbons specifically credited his colleague and roommate Jack Jensen with getting him interested in literature and teaching how to learn to write by reading.

His first editor in the business was William G. Shepherd, who later wrote the definitive account of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire and would later be the first foreign journalist to defeat British censors and report the first Zeppelin attack on London. In his career, Gibbons would many times get around government minders to get the news out.

It is reasonable to credit both these men in Gibbons' success as a writer and reporter. As recent Congressional Medal of Honor winner Staff Sgt. Sal Giunta said: "I haven't guided myself to the position I'm in. I've been mentored. I've been tutored. I've been taught along the way" (Cohen).

Gibbons has his problems. His failure to report Obregon's victory at Celaya is not easily explained and his World War I reporting is marred somewhat by his pro-war speeches in the United States towards the end of the war.

Also, many characters in his stories are sort of broad stereotypes. Some of the starving in Samara are called “slant eyed Mongolians,” it is clear here that Gibbons has sympathy for the sufferers and is simply trying to be descriptive, but such a description has the possibility of dehumanizing people he actually was trying to humanize.

Nonetheless, Gibbons' *Laconia* story and his stories from Russia in 1921 stand out as towering achievements. No Pulitzer Prize for foreign correspondence existed at the time – and the prize for reporting in 1922 went to Kirke L. Simpson of the Associated Press for his story of the burial of the unknown soldier – but had there been one, it is hard to imagine Gibbons not being a contender for his famine coverage.

Overall, Gibbons deserves a spot in the pantheon of great newspaper reporters. People like Talley and Walter Duranty couldn't even touch him (Duranty actually said as much).

That most journalists of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century don't know who Gibbons was is indeed a shame.

His writing is in the same caliber of competitors like Damon Runyon, his newsgathering abilities are on par with those of the best of investigative reporters and in terms of telling the story of the common people, he is in the same league as Ernie Pyle.



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