

# If It Weren't for My Wife...

Life had dead-ended in the copper mines for this uneducated youth—until a vivacious schoolteacher sparked his will to succeed

*Editors' Note: Sen. Michael Mansfield of Montana holds one of the most powerful political posts in the country—Majority Leader of the U. S. Senate. He began his career in Congress in 1942 as a member of the House of Representatives and entered the Senate in 1952.*

GUS ERICKSON was one of the strongest men I've known. For most of 1926 we stayed in the same rooming house in Butte, Mont. We ate together, loafed together, talked together. And together we sweated in the dust-filled air of the copper mines.

Gus died of silicosis that year. The dust had gotten into his lungs. I watched his weight and muscle disappear. I saw him doubled over in bed, coughing and choking until his face was deathly white. At his funeral, I kept thinking: this could be me... this could be me.

I was 19 when I went down on my first shift as a mucker (ore shoveler) at \$4.25 a day. That was big money in 1922, but men paid a hard price for it. I spent the next nine years watching many like Gus cough their lungs out.

This was a world I might still be in—struggling to stay alive—if it hadn't been for a vivacious, copper-haired girl who taught high-school English in Butte and showed me the way out of the mines. Maureen Hayes had been raised in the mining camp and started teaching in Butte in 1928. Her sister introduced us. Suddenly, I had a new friend—perhaps the only genuinely close friend in my life.

I had always been a loner who kept his thoughts to himself, but Maureen brought out the talk in me. I told her about my early love of history and adventure books and how, at 14, I'd run away from my home in Great Falls, Mont., to join the Navy. We talked about school. The fact that she had a college education while I'd never gotten beyond the eighth grade troubled me.

"Mike, if it bothers you, do something about it," she finally said. "I'll help you study for a high-school diploma." Within days she had me enrolled in a correspondence course. From then on

## By SEN. MIKE MANSFIELD

Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate



Mrs. Mansfield aids her husband at his office.

I spent most of my free hours studying.

But in 1929 and 1930 the depression hit Butte, and the mines began to lay off workers. I was scared; mining was the only work I knew. So when two friends working in South America told me their company was offering the security of three-year contracts to experienced miners, I quickly shared the news with Maureen.

She was thoughtful for more than a minute. Then she said in a soft, serious voice: "Mike, are you sure you really want a career in mining? Since you've always loved history and reading, why don't you take the money you've been saving and go down to the state university at Missoula and study for a degree?"

"But what about us?" I interrupted. "We couldn't afford to get married for years." Maureen smiled. "The most important thing is for you to find yourself; we'll talk about marriage later."

The idea was absurd, and yet I knew I disliked my life as a miner. Maureen argued on. Finally, in the spring of 1931 when people were crying for jobs, I quit the mines and went to college.

Maureen continued to teach in Butte; our only

contact was through letters. But by 1932, the separation was becoming too painful. So one day that autumn Maureen gave up her job and drove down to Missoula, where we were married. She had waited three long years for me.

There were other couples living on the campus, but I doubt if any were poorer than we. I recall one time when I saw hamburger selling at three pounds for 25 cents. This seemed like a bargain, so I bought 25 cents worth. But when Maureen saw the meat she began to cry.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "We haven't any place to put this meat," she said. "We haven't got an icebox." The meat was distributed to friends, and from that moment on I let Maureen do all the buying.

BUT NO MATTER how much we scrimped, we could not make ends meet. Again, it was Maureen who found an answer. One evening she picked up the latest rent bill and said: "Mike, I think it's time I cashed in my insurance policy."

I started to protest, but she shook her head angrily. "Be sensible, Mike—keeping you in school is our insurance for the future." Her logic was unanswerable. I could only promise myself that someday I would repay this wonderful girl.

Several weeks before my graduation, the chairman of the history department asked me to drop in to his office. His first question was: "Are you taking your master's, Mike?" I told him how worried I was about my finances. He nodded: "That's why I called you in. I can give you two history classes at the University next year. They won't pay much, but they will at least take care of your rent and a few other problems. You'll be able to go on for your master's."

I've never been a man given to expressive emotions. But even today, after years of dealing with momentous affairs in Washington, I can still vividly recall the joy and excitement I felt at that moment. Here was the goal for which Maureen and I had been striving. At last, I was truly a part of the world of books and ideas.

Maureen was working in the kitchen when I arrived home. "Tonight, Mrs. Mansfield," I said with a mock severe voice as I untied her apron, "we are going out for a steak dinner." It was my first payment on a long overdue bill.

## COVER:

*M/Sergeant Paul Darcy, photographed by Arthur Schatz, is a rugged veteran of our Army Special Forces. Read his story, "I Train America's Guerrillas," page 4.*

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