

Stephen Wallis Merrihew
&
American Lawn Tennis
by Richard Hillway and
Geoff Felder

Many tennis historians today consider S. Wallis Merrihew the most important tennis journalist of the twentieth century. A number of tennis collectors and historians rate his magazine, AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS (ALT), the most informative, comprehensive, interesting and best tennis magazine ever produced.

Merrihew became a tennis institution as the founder, editor and writer of ALT from 1907 until his death in 1947. He was also the publisher of the magazine until late 1942. But what was so good about the magazine that each issue could be considered a work of art, a testament to Merrihew?

The magazine was widespread. Some years ALT was mailed to 72 different countries. To gather information, Merrihew himself made seven trips abroad to Wimbledon and Europe between 1926 and 1938. He continually traveled across America to cover tennis tournaments, sometimes acting as a linesman and taking the center service line, the best place from which to view a match.



In ALT, Merrihew took sides and candidly discussed the tennis issues of the day with the readers, including amateurism, rankings and decisions of the USLTA. He maintained a positive approach in his debates. Within his column, "Intimate Talks with my Readers", Merrihew covered any topic of tennis interest. Yale University's William Lyon Phelps called Merrihew's ALT "the last bastion of personalized publishing."

AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS never missed an issue. From 1907 through 1950, 15 issues were published every year. The magazines were large, usually about 12 by 9 inches, varying in length between 32 and 64 pages, packed full of information. Merrihew noted that with every issue, he had to "crowd out" stories. Though pictures cost more than print, he felt "pictures were the answer" to every good story and aimed for at least one picture on every page. He refused to put ads or a table of contents on the cover, a common practice in earlier magazines, because he thought the covers belonged to the readers.

Merrihew did it all, including personal travel to tournaments and meetings, advertising, reporting, writing, getting photographs, editing, publishing and even sending out bills to subscribers. During the war years, ALT kept the boys at the front in touch with each other and with tennis.

Merrihew favored racial diversity and printed results from the American Tennis Association (the African-American organization) events (see JTCA 28:434). He pushed for amateurs and professionals to play together in open tennis tournaments.

His magazines covered tournament results from home and abroad; the tournament schedule; Davis and Wightman Cups; men's, women's, pro, amateur, collegiate, veteran and junior tennis; obituaries; high quality illustrations; letters from readers; past players; instruction; and nearly all aspects of the game. His life became a daily campaign for the betterment of tennis.

Birth, Family and Early Life.

Stephen Wallis Merrihew, affectionately called "Pop" by most in his later years, was born the son of Captain Stephen Wallis Merrihew, master of the packet BUSH, and Caroline (Starr) Merrihew. He entered the world on October 14, 1862, in Wilmington, Delaware, where he spent his youth. Because Merrihew and his father had the same name, and since his father was called Stephen, he went by Wallis. His name was usually listed as S. Wallis Merrihew.

Merrihew left school to become a telegraph operator. During his early twenties, he took up bicycle riding and racing, a sport he enjoyed from 1885 to 1900. Much of his riding was done on an English "high wheel" bicycle with the front wheel 56 inches in height. He rode for both the Wilmington Wheelmen and the Pennsylvania Bicycle Club. His highlight came in defeating, during a one-mile race, Arthur Zimmerman ("Zimmy"), who later became a famous cyclist. Merrihew became co-owner of a bicycle shop and wrote for the wheelmen's journals. He moved to New York during the 1880s where he became associate editor of BICYCLE WORLD from 1895 to 1900. After the bicycle craze declined, he switched to automobiles, worked for AUTOMOTIVE TOPICS magazine and rose to editor. It was from that magazine's office that Merrihew published his early ALT magazines, beginning in 1907, at very little cost to himself. But in 1911, he resigned from AUTOMOTIVE TOPICS to give his full attention to AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS.

Beginning in 1901, Merrihew had begun playing tennis daily. He reported, "I was a tennis bug or fan, one who played six or seven times a week at the Dean Street grounds of the King's County Club in Brooklyn, New York." From then on tennis played a huge role in Merrihew's life. Many years a member of the United States National Lawn Tennis Association ranking committee, in 1918 he was made chairman of that organization's committee which compiled the first general revision of the rules.

Merrihew had married Hetty K. Lawson in 1894. They separated in 1921, and, after her death, he married Daisy Smith in 1934, a widow

and the daughter of Sylvanus Heath and the mother of Gerald Smith.

Merrihew's AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS Begins.

In March of 1907, Merrihew was invited to a meeting of the Executive Committee of the USNLTA in New York to spell out his plan to produce a new magazine called AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS. Merrihew's own words follow. "There had been no lawn tennis publication of any kind for nearly five years. Three or four 'Bulletins,' some devoted to lawn tennis and some containing a golf section, had been published in the '90s and later; but the last of these, called LAWN TENNIS and edited by J. Parmly Paret, had passed out of existence in 1902, two or three months after my dollar had been paid for a year's subscription. The years rolled on, and the game was becoming more popular, and more universal, and many people thought that something should be done about a new lawn tennis magazine."

Merrihew planned to launch a tennis magazine that would be far superior to any yet seen. His goals were grandiose. Merrihew goes on, "I discussed the matter with Fred G. Anderson, who was then ranked in the First Ten and a member of the Executive Committee of the national body. He was keen to have me launch the new venture, and he was my supporter and mentor at the committee meeting. It so happened that another tennis man, Henry Burdick, had about decided to shy his castor into the ring."

In separate meetings, Burdick and Merrihew explained their proposals to the Executive Committee. Four-time U.S. champion Robert Wrenn asked Merrihew, "Do you play lawn tennis?" Bill Larned, who was to win seven U.S. singles' titles asked, "How do you propose to obtain your accounts of prominent tournaments--from the newspaper reports?"

Burdick's plan was to publish a bulletin, similar to the earlier failed magazines, containing largely tournament results and schedules with a minimum of pictures. The USNLTA accepted the proposal from the 45 year-old Merrihew and the Executive Committee made ALT its official organ (see JTCA 25:386). Merrihew's first magazine

contained 32 pages with covers that were 11 3/4 inches by 8 1/4 inches and 22 pictures. He tried never to use the same photograph more than once. This relationship between the ALT and the U.S. body lasted until March of 1924 when ALT was dropped as its official magazine because Merrihew had strongly sided with Bill Tilden against the USLTA in their dispute over the "player-writer" rule. Merrihew, therefore, lost the \$600 that the USLTA had paid annually as a subsidy to his magazine.

Merrihew felt that the USLTA player-writer rule was unwise, unfair and aimed specifically against one player--the champion Tilden. In a May 14, 1924 NEW YORK TIMES article, Merrihew made his case. What was the player-writer rule? The USLTA had barred from tournament play anyone who wrote articles on tennis for newspapers, magazines, periodicals or pamphlets and received substantial pay for them while, at the same time, engaging in tennis competition. Merrihew pointed out that none of the 25 or more nations that had competed in Davis Cup play had ever adopted such a regulation. To the contrary, they encouraged their players to write on tennis. The Australian Lawn Tennis Association had encouraged Pat O'Hara Wood, a member of their 1924 Davis Cup team, to write accounts of the matches he played or witnessed. Merrihew argued that if a player wrote about tennis matches, it in no way made that player a tennis professional.

The Early Years of AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS.

The early years of ALT were tough-going financially. The great panic of 1907 hit the country in October. Merrihew wrote that, "[o]ne could not withdraw any of one's money from a bank without relating in detail what it was to be used for. ALT was in the hole to the extent of \$3000 or \$4000." Merrihew had to borrow money to keep the magazine going. He pondered shutting it down but felt he owed it to the subscribers to continue the magazine. This was especially true since from the start he had bragged that ALT would not go under as had earlier tennis magazines. For about five years Merrihew put money into ALT. "There was no overhead, no expense save for printer, paper maker, engraver, photographer and

correspondents." Once the magazine finally gained a firm footing, the U.S. entered World War I during 1917 and 1918, another hurdle to be overcome. Yet, Merrihew struggled and survived for another three decades.

The Final Years of AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS.

On October 23, 1942, the ownership of ALT passed from the 80 year-old Merrihew, to Dr. William Plumer Jacobs of Clinton, South Carolina. At that point, Jacobs became publisher of the magazine but Merrihew remained as editor and writer of his column, "Intimate Talks with my Readers," until his death in 1947. Unfortunately, Jacobs died of a heart attack at age 54 on July 26, 1948. The final AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS issue was that of October, 1951. From November, 1951 through August, 1953, its title changed to THE RACQUET, THE MAGAZINE OF TENNIS, BADMINTON, SQUASH. Gladys Heldman's WORLD TENNIS (WT) purchased the assets of THE RACQUET and Heldman was editor through 1973; the magazine lasted under other editors through August of 1991. It then became TENNIS ILLUSTRATED for September, 1991 under editors Bud Collins and Steve Flink. The end came quickly when the owner, Family Media, Inc., cancelled the magazine.

ALT as Book Publisher.

S. Wallis Merrihew did not only found, edit, write, and publish the AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS magazine. A suggestion to Merrihew from J. Parmly Paret, the 1899 U.S. singles' runner-up, led to Merrihew's initial venture into book publishing. In 1915, METHODS AND PLAYERS OF MODERN LAWN TENNIS, written by Paret and edited by Merrihew, was published by ALT. In that book, about 70 of the top players responded to questions about their tennis techniques and habits. This collaboration resulted in four subsequent volumes by these two men. Their five books as a group are called the "Lawn Tennis Library." All 5 of these volumes were published by ALT. Two further volumes were planned and advertised but never came to fruition. (See JTCA 24:378.)

Due to the success of these books, the Paret-Merrihew partnership continued on with their eight "annual" tennis instructional books from 1933 through 1940. These books included articles by top players such as Tilden, Lacoste, Cochet, Vines, Lenglen and Wills, with lessons by Paret, edited by Merrihew and published by ALT.

These paperback books were HOW TO PLAY LAWN TENNIS (1933), EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LAWN TENNIS (1934), LAWN TENNIS AS PLAYED BY THE CHAMPIONS (1935), HOW TO PLAY LAWN TENNIS (1936), HOW LAWN TENNIS IS PLAYED (1937), LAWN TENNIS ILLUSTRATED (1938), LAWN TENNIS MANUAL (1939), and LAWN TENNIS UP-TO-DATE (1940). Robert C. Hynson joined Merrihew in editing the last three editions (1938-1940). The 1940 book used slow-motion pictures to illustrate expert strokes. World War II brought an end to these annuals.

Merrihew's ALT also published, for a time, USNLTA programs. ALT began publishing Davis Cup programs in 1911 and U.S. Men's and Women's Championship programs in 1915. For this privilege, Merrihew had to pay thousands of dollars to the USNLTA/USLTA. (See p. 456 for illustrations.)

But, two things happened that ended this agreement. The first was mentioned above when the organization dropped ALT over Merrihew's defense of Bill Tilden. The second, perhaps related, reason was that the USLTA put their price for the program-printing privilege up so high that Merrihew refused to meet it.

Merrihew's Death.

Stephen Wallis Merrihew died on March 21, 1947 at the age of 84. He passed away at Laurel, Mississippi, where he and his wife were guests for the winter at the home of a former associate editor, Robert C. Hynson. His ALT offices had remained in New York for 40 years. The Merrihews had made plans to spend April and May in Palm Beach, Florida. The ALT of May, 1947, reported, "The day before he died he complained of pains, particularly in his arms, and about ten o'clock that night a doctor was called and gave him some medicine and assured Mrs. Merrihew that her husband's condition was

not critical. He slept quietly that night and sometime early the following morning he breathed his last." Merrihew was survived by his widow, a stepson, Gerald Smith, and one brother, Lincoln Merrihew.

Whatever Happened to Merrihew's Biographical Sketches, Photos and Books?

Throughout his life, Merrihew collected huge amounts of tennis information in at least three forms--Biographical Sketch Blanks (BSBs); photographs of the players and sites; and a library of tennis books. The question is: where are these now? Merrihew wrote about his biographical sketches in the February, 1944 ALT. "It was more than thirty years ago that I began to collect this memorabilia and now there are in our ALT office 10 volumes of these BSBs, each volume containing some 90 blanks. The subjects include practically all persons of importance in this country and many scores of those in other countries. Many of them are in the handwriting of their subjects." These included birthdates, height, weight, when the player started tennis, style of play, address, type and size of racket, first tournament, etc. The fact that these Biographical Sketch Blanks were later passed along to WORLD TENNIS magazine can be seen in a January 23, 1956 Gladys Heldman letter to tennis historian Frank Phelps. "Yes, we do have the complete Biographical Sketch Blanks which Mr. Merrihew collected..."

Merrihew discussed his collection of photographs in the ALT of November 20, 1927. "The monumental labor of arranging ALT's collection of photos has actually been completed, after years of dreaming about it. During the past few weeks every photo has been handled...The residue totaling something in excess of 1,000 prints has been stamped, captioned, marked for filing and put away in filing cases bought for the purpose and properly indexed." Many of these had been donated to ALT by such men as Parmly Paret and Beals Wright.

The ALT book library was also extensive. In the December 15, 1917 issue of ALT, Merrihew told how he finally received a copy of Dr. James Dwight's LAWN TENNIS (1886) through the generosity of George Wright

(Wright & Ditson). In the May 20, 1937 issue of ALT, Merrihew reported that he had recently acquired 21 yearbooks (1916-36) of the West Side Tennis Club. During the 1950s, this book collection also passed into the hands of WORLD TENNIS magazine. The WT issue of January, 1954, stated that, "WORLD TENNIS is opening its extensive library to the public." In the following March issue, it printed a list of over 100 of its books that were available to be borrowed.

So what happened to these items? Where are they now? About 1993, co-author and tennis researcher Geoff Felder spoke with a gentleman who had visited the Family Media offices after they had announced their closure on August 7, 1991. He specialized in decorative arts and so was looking to buy office furniture and wall-hangings. He had read of an auction

sale and was investigating. On the premises, he noticed a number of tennis books that had been boxed and bought some of them himself. He sighted a large number of boxes in the offices and concluded that they were about to be liquidated.

It is common when a company such as Family Media shuts its doors that some of its inventory is sold and other assets are simply tossed out. Since Family Media had been the last owner of the magazine TENNIS ILLUSTRATED which had come from WORLD TENNIS which in turn came from RACQUET that had earlier been AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS, it is likely that Merrihew's biographical sketches and photographs were in some of these boxes and were lost at that time. What a shame!

