

History

Dolly Dahle and the Business of Technical Communication

by Ed Malone

In *Go Write, Young Man* (1961), later revised and republished as *Billions for Confusion* (1963), Malden Grange Bishop describes the technical writing profession in Southern California in the 1950s:

"Never was there a field of writing so full of promises for the writer. The writers who respond to the demands of this fantastically big and incredibly rich field will not be writers who have to live in cold garrets and grimly starve for their art. They will be writers who loll beside warm swimming pools and dip dainty crackers into crystal dishes of caviar. These writers will not be driven from their attics by screaming landladies demanding their rent. They are more apt to be driven to their country clubs by bowing chauffeurs." [1]

Bishop's description may seem like humorous hyperbole, but it is borne out to some extent by the remarkable success of a woman named Dorothy "Dolly" Dahle (See Figure 1). In 1955, Dahle started a technical typing business with a \$600 loan, a desk, a typewriter, and a telephone. [2] By 1962, her company was reportedly grossing \$500,000 a year. [3]



Figure 1: Dolly Dahle [5]

From Orphan to "Big Bruiser"

Dolly was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1925. [2] During the Great Depression, she had to spend seven years in an orphanage because of "a broken home." [4] When she was 15, she left the orphanage and went to work for Packard Motors in Detroit. Somehow, she managed to complete her high school education in the evenings while holding down a full-time day job. [5] During this period, she also learned to do the hula, which she performed at USO shows. [4]

Her life took an unexpected turn when she entered a talent contest sponsored by New York nightclub owner Billy Rose, who was trolling the country for new talent. The winner of the contest was supposed to be the person who received the most applause. "I got plenty of whistles," Dahle said, "but not the most applause." Nevertheless, Rose offered her a job, and she moved to New York City, where she performed the hula at the famous Diamond Horseshoe Club. Just one inch short of six feet, Dahle belonged to a group of women that Rose called his "Big Bruisers." [4]

After spending a year in New York City, Dahle and two friends moved to Southern California, hoping to find work in the movie business. [5] For a short time, Dahle worked as a showgirl at Earl Carroll's nightclub in Hollywood. [4] Later, she worked as a fashion model, a bookkeeper, a stenographer, and a bank clerk. A brief marriage in the late 1940s ended in divorce. [5]

Not Just a Typing Business

In 1950, Dahle took a job as a proofreader at North American Aviation. From there, she advanced quickly in the technical communication field, becoming a production supervisor at H. L. Yoh Engineering and then a production manager for Catalogue and Advertising Producers. [4]

With this experience behind her, the 30-year-old Dahle decided to start her own business in Los Angeles—a company called Publishing Production Service (PPS). [2] The company's specialization was "Reproducible Typing to Government Specifications," including the following kinds of typing:

- vellum
- justified copy
- tabular
- volume
- statistical
- direct plates [6]

By 1959, the company had expanded its repertoire to include much more than typing:

- proofreading
- editing
- photographs
- copy research
- cartoons
- cold-set type
- page make-up [7] (See Figure 2)

WE'VE
EXPANDED



again!!

editing cartoons
justified type cold-set type
photographs proofreading
copy research page make-up
pick-up and delivery distribution

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COMPANY MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS

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S E R V I C E, INC.

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725 NORTH WESTERN AVENUE
LOS ANGELES 29, CALIFORNIA

Figure 2: Display Ad [7]

In its first year (1955), PPS grossed a mere \$1,500 and netted only \$18. But those figures increased sharply over the next six years. By 1961, PPS was taking in about \$250,000 annually and had more than a dozen special typewriters, worth \$800 each, and about 40 employees.[2] "Every time the Russians or Americans orbit another rocket," Dahle said, "I get more business, because everyone has a better idea to suggest and the proposals have to be rushed into print." [3]

The PPS staff did production work on technical manuals, classified reports, government contract proposals, and house magazines for clients, such as Hughes Aircraft, Convair, North American, Douglas, and Lockheed.[4] In one interview, Dahle credited her employees for her company's success: "Most of the girls I hire are Japanese. They seem to be very well suited because their work is so exacting and neat.... They are able to go to college by working for me." [2]

A Woman in the Early Profession

Dahle was often the object of jokes and gossip in the media. There were puns on her name ("Doll"), the type of work she did ("Publisher of House Organs"), and especially her height ("Towering Aspirations").[4],[8] At times, she seemed to encourage this humor and even participate in it. "I found that being a woman can be a detriment rather than a help in selling," she said. "For example, one person thought I was trying to sell sex." But then she added that her company was now "his sole vendor for *reproduction typing*" (italics added). In the same interview, she discusses her body measurements in some detail.[2]

A man who worked as a technical writer in Southern California in the 1950s and 1960s recalled that Dahle "was always accompanied by her attorney" at client meetings.[9] Most of her clients and colleagues had never met a woman with such power and money. As one reporter commented, "The beautiful and unmarried Miss Dahle (rhymes with mail) is quite a contrast to the public's image of the obese business executive with a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* in one hand and a fork in the other." [4] Attempts to explain her success often resulted in wild speculation: "There was some speculation (never

proven) that there was Las Vegas (Mafia) money behind the business." [9]

In the early technical writing profession, businesses such as PPS were usually run by men. PPS was an exception, but it was not the only one. In Chicago, for example, Rosalie Kohn and Ernestine Kohn started Rosern Publishing and Procedures in 1955 and operated it successfully for many years. [10] A woman did not have to have Mafia backing to succeed in the business during this era, but she did need to have some experience in the field, a keen business sense, and a thick skin.

Active in TPS and STWP

As many of you probably know, the Society for Technical Communication used to be the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers (STWP), which was created when the L.A.-based Technical Publishing Society (TPS) merged with the Ohio-based Society of Technical Writers and Editors in 1960. [11]

Dahle was an active member of both TPS and STWP. In 1958, she chaired a panel on printing and reproduction at TPS's 4th annual convention in L.A. The only other woman on the convention program was Rachael Hofsaes, an employee of the Houston-Fearless Corporation, who had the responsibility of entertaining the wives and children of the men who were attending the convention. [12] On January 26, 1959, Dahle was elected second vice president of TPS and presumably served in that capacity until the merger with STWP. [13]

The merger of TPS and STWE must have had a cooling effect on the L.A. chapter because its membership declined. [14] Dahle remained active, however, serving as chapter secretary from 1961 to 1963. [9] She was succeeded by Helen G. Caird, who later served as chapter president (1965-1966) and eventually president of STC (1972-1973). According to Caird, Dahle "WAS the Los Angeles Chapter of the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers" in the early 1960s. [14]

Request for Information

PPS was located first at 6009 W. 3rd St. and later at 725 N. Western Ave. in Los Angeles, California. [6],[7] Dahle owned a house near Silver Lake in East Hollywood and a ski lodge on Mammoth Mountain in east-central California [2],[4] She seems to have disappeared from the newspapers and organizational publications after 1963. Perhaps she married and changed her name. I would be interested in interviewing anyone who knew Dahle or worked at Publishing Production Service in the 1950s or 1960s.

References

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- [14] Helen Caird, "Looking Back ...," *Technical Communication*, second quarter, 1989, p. 170

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