

John McGuire was the consummate newspaperman and raconteur

In [Obituaries](#)

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John McGuire went to art school in the late 1950s intending to become a painter. After five years at the Art Institute of Chicago, he tossed aside the paint brush and found his way to a typewriter. Over the next four decades — most of them at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch -- the failed artist became the consummate journalist and storyteller. His body of work ran from winsome features about animals, to sordid tales of crime, to spooky tales of exorcisms, to interviews with movie stars that were by turns revealing and hilarious. In the latter part of his career, he specialized in obituaries.

John Michael McGuire died Tuesday morning (Aug. 11, 2009) in Springfield, Mo. He was 71 years old. The cause of death is uncertain at this point. Mr. McGuire and his wife, Lynn, of the St. Louis suburb of Oakland, were visiting their son, Joseph, his wife, Mayuko, and three of their seven grandchildren. Family members said he died in his sleep.

Now here is a humble effort to emulate the great one's gift of capturing a life well lived and how that life became a gift to his family, friends and readers.

In almost every obituary that Mr. McGuire ever reported, a friend or family member would say that so-and-so "will be missed." Mr. McGuire usually dropped these platitudes. Instead he related in rich detail how the departed walked in the world and why the example he or she set had meant so much.

But in Mr. McGuire's case "will be missed" is entirely appropriate because his presence -- though entirely unpretentious and unaffected -- was utterly compelling.

"John 'Mike' McGuire was just about the last old-school newspaperman -- Irish, raffish, suspicious of authority, fond of the tavern and gifted almost immeasurably with words," said Harry Levins, the recently retired senior writer for the Post-Dispatch. "And heavens, he was fine company -- chatty, funny and a font of wonderful tales, most of them true. We'll miss him and then some."

Post-Dispatch columnist Bill McClellan appreciated Mr. McGuire's gifts and used them to his advantage. "When I wrote the book "Evidence of Murder," (about the homicide by drowning of Julie Post in a hotel bathtub) I asked John to go with me to New



Orleans to research it partially because he was so much fun,” McClellan said. “But I also knew that people instinctively liked and trusted him. They knew that this was a guy who wasn’t trying to pull anything over on anyone. People always opened up to him.”

McClellan regularly hosts tours of the newspaper for friends or for visitors who have won the visit by making a donation to a worthy cause. At the end of the tours, he would frequently take his guests to the Missouri Bar and Grill where Mr. McGuire would await to put a capper on the visit with stories to delight or curl the hair. “People thought that was the neatest thing meeting John McGuire,” McClellan said. “I could leave early and he would stay” charming visitors to the last drop.

Journalists are known as a competitive breed, not just with the newspaper or broadcast outlets down the street, but often within their own newsrooms. Mr. McGuire was collaborative beyond anyone’s standard. When a reporter needing help with a story would approach seeking a good source, Mr. McGuire would gladly share his Rolodex. In many cases, he would drop what he was doing to call the source to make an introduction. Or he would do the interview himself then hand off the notes to the reporter, never asking for credit.

“He was the best, best colleague there could be, and the most gentle and caring and accepting friend a fellow could ever have,” said Robert W. Duffy, associate editor of the Beacon, and a former Post-Dispatch editor. “If he had a fault, it was that he could never say no to anyone. I guess that’s not a fault at all when you think about it, but a manifestation of his generosity and the size of his good and faithful heart. When I think of that wonderful old Post-Dispatch newsroom, which in those days was filled with men and women drenched with light and intelligence and wit, the most luminous one was Johnny,” Duffy said.

The editor may be reaching for the digital blue pencil at this point because to go on too long about how beloved the man was is to give short shrift to the journalism. Mr. McGuire was considered among the best storytellers the Post-Dispatch ever produced. He was versatile. He could cover cops, courts, labor, Anheuser-Busch (a beat all by itself), and religion. He could do it fast when necessary and he would get it right. He had a voice so distinct that regular readers did not need to see a byline to know the work was his. He was a marvelous telephone interviewer with the ability to pick up on nuances and meaning that others could only glean through eye contact and observing body language. Many celebrities would stay on the phone with him for an hour when their agents had promised just 10 or 20 minutes.

Little presaged Mr. McGuire’s 40 years in journalism. He was born in Kalamazoo, Mich., May 16, 1938, and later moved with his family 20 miles east to Paw Paw, where his dad operated a grocery. Mr. McGuire attributed his work ethic and his people skills to his dad, who was bent on keeping his shelves stocked and his customers happy. He graduated from Paw Paw High School, then attended the Art Institute of Chicago, where he spent five years before finally deciding that art would not be his field. He transferred to Michigan State University and graduated in 1961. He served a stint in the U.S. Army as a message-center clerk and cryptographer.

After his discharge, Mr. McGuire worked briefly for an advertising agency in Lansing, Mich., and then landed a job at the Toledo Blade as a labor reporter. He moved on to the Post-Dispatch in January 1967 after a work stoppage at the Blade.

Mr. McGuire started on what was then known as the city desk and moved to features in mid-career. He was a great fit for features. Joe Edwards, the founder of the Walk of Fame and owner of Blueberry Hill in the Delmar Loop, once estimated that Mr. McGuire alone had interviewed at least a third of those whose bronze stars are on the Delmar Boulevard sidewalks. Among the

stars Mr. McGuire interviewed from here and elsewhere were actors Eldred Gregory Peck, George C. Scott and Cary Grant; radio pioneers Robert Hyland, Harry Caray, Jack Buck and Paul Harvey; presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and his wife, Nancy; screen stars Sophia Loren, Jane Russell and Debbie Reynolds; Chicago columnist Mike Royko; TV's Jerry Seinfeld, author Kurt Vonnegut, and the recently departed Irish author, Frank McCourt.

Mr. McGuire loved the McCourts, interviewing Frank and his brother, Malachy, several times over the years. Mr. McGuire began his first interview piece in his classically elliptical way.

So there he was in the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, standing amid a bunch of dentists gathered for a convention. He stood out:

The wavy white hair, no tie, the thick lips, the sad eyes, once objects of childhood teasing. He once had a terrible siege of conjunctivitis, which left his eyes looking like two holes in the snow. "Scabby-eyed, dancing, blubber-gob," the urchins of Limerick in the west of Ireland called Frank McCourt, now the newest lion of the literary world.

As an obituary writer in the last years before his retirement in 2005, Mr. McGuire laid to rest St. Louis' somebodies and the most interesting nobodies he could find in paid obituary notices or through his many sources around town. Perhaps the most memorable was stripper Evelyn West, known for her \$50,000 treasure chest (insured by Lloyds of London.) Mr. McGuire had been tipped that Ms. West died in obscurity in Hollywood, Fla., in late 2004 with word reaching St. Louis months later in 2005. The word came from a fan who had a fondness for both West and her lingerie, then available on eBay.

Mr. McGuire was dispatched to the Sunshine State to learn what he could about Ms. West's demise. In his disarming and charming way, he talked the landlord into unlocking West's apartment and allowing him to look around. And he came back with a film-noir style report that the Post-Dispatch promoted on its front page.

This is how it began:

When a police officer climbed through a rear bedroom window of a cream-colored duplex at 708 Columbus Parkway on Nov. 14, he found the body of a St. Louis legend.

Amy Charles had not been seen for several days. Friends from Tampa, Fla. -- those who had known her in her heyday -- had called and e-mailed repeatedly but got no response. They called the police, who found the door locked and no one to answer the knock.

As it turned out, Charles had died in her sleep. Nearby were medications for thyroid and heart problems. Officer William Comeford filed his report -- death apparently from natural causes -- and returned to business as usual.

He ignored the clues that this 83-year-old woman once had been famous. They could be found in the stacks of provocative photographs all about her quarters; three bedrooms stacked with boxes that made it impossible to walk through the rooms. Some contained the outfits she donned backstage and then discarded onstage to the cheers of hundreds each night.

Amy Charles was known in St. Louis as Evelyn "\$50,000 treasure chest" West. Her chief claim to fame: her 39 1/2-inch bust that Lloyds of London insured for the \$50K. She performed twice nightly in a striptease act at the Stardust Club on the old

DeBaliviere Strip, just north of Forest Park and its Jefferson Memorial. In St. Louis in the '50s and '60s, her name was as familiar to male adolescents and young adults as that of Stan Musial, though, of course, the two inspired different forms of adulation."

Longtime colleague Mary Delach Leonard, a Beacon reporter and former Post-Dispatch editor and feature writer, called Mr. McGuire, "Jack the Journalist."

"It started because one day I teased him that he could be the inspiration for a superhero series about a journalist," Leonard said. "Sometimes he'd sign his emails 'Jack O' Journalist.' He really was a superman of journalism as far as I was concerned."

Leonard said, "John never met a person or visited a place that he didn't like, and he would get so interested and immersed in every story assignment that he just couldn't help but tell the reader all about it. He would drive some editors nuts with all of the extraneous detail, but I loved it. That was John's style -- like taking a trip through the countryside on old Route 66, which he also loved writing about. Every John M. McGuire story was an adventure, and there was no traveling the interstate. He'd eventually take you from Point A to Point B, but along the way there were all these delightful, quirky details that only John would notice. I am a better reporter and writer today because I edited John's copy for the old Sunday Magazine and Everyday sections for 10 years."

Mr. McGuire's son, Matthew C. McGuire of Kirkwood, said his dad was "first and foremost a reporter. It was impossible to untangle that from who he was."

Like his buddy, McClellan, Mr. McGuire could never be described as dapper. Both men were given to wearing the first thing that came out of the drawer, whether it was pressed, had a collar or matched the trousers they were wearing that day. Or so it seemed. But McClellan could discern a difference. Mr. McGuire often wore Irish soccer jerseys and an array of hats and caps from tam-o-shanters to tweeds. McClellan observed that Mr. McGuire sometimes came to work with his shoes duct taped together and his glasses held together with safety pins. Even so, "most people thought I was just a bad dresser," McClellan said. "They thought John had style."

Surviving are his wife, Lynn (nee Petty), and his son Joseph, his wife Mayuko and their children, Max, and new twins Hannah and Ezekiel; son, Matthew C. McGuire of Kirkwood and his children, Grace and Luka McGuire, and son John M. McGuire Jr., and his wife Tamara of Clayton, and their children, Mary and Beatrice (Bea). Also surviving is Mr. McGuire's sister, Lynne McGuire, of Paw Paw, Mich. Mr. McGuire was preceded in death by his parents John (Jack) and Uriel McGuire, and his brother, Patrick McGuire.

Visitation for Mr. McGuire will be from 4-8 p.m., Fri., Aug. 14 at Bopp Chapel, 10610 Manchester Road, in Kirkwood. Services will be at 10 a.m., Sat., Aug. 15 at Mary Queen of Peace Parish, 676 W. Lockwood Ave., in Webster Groves.

Gloria S. Ross also contributed information for this story.