

# Donation of the Month

Object: Erwin Funk's Newspaper Convention Badges

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Donors: *Morning News of Northwest Arkansas* & Rogers Hough Memorial Library



Rogers has had many newspapers throughout its history. All have made their contributions, keeping citizens informed about local events, arguing for and against political candidates, and printing advertisements, obituaries, and school columns. The town's best-known newspaperman was Erwin Funk, editor of the *Rogers Democrat*. During his lifetime he became one of the leading small-town editors in the nation and an influential member of the Rogers community.

Erwin Charles Funk was born January 5, 1877, at Deep River, Iowa, to Emanuel and Addie Funk. He grew up in western Iowa and graduated in 1893 from Carroll High School. Although he had worked as a newspaper carrier and high school reporter, Funk aspired to follow in his father's footsteps and become a lawyer. In 1894 Emanuel Funk traded some land for the *Manning Monitor* and put 17-year-old Erwin in charge as editor, launching him on a newspaper career lasting four decades.

Seeking a milder climate, the Funks came to the Ozarks in 1896. They bought an idle newspaper plant and began the *Springdale Democrat*, but soon realized that the city couldn't support two papers. While in Rogers on business, Emanuel Funk had the chance to trade some land for the *Rogers Democrat*. Erwin Funk set to work as editor of the *Democrat*. He married Mintie Michael in 1903 and immersed himself in community affairs, supporting the library, serving on the school board, and joining the Rotary Club.

During World War I Funk was active with both the American Red Cross and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). When asked to serve as publicity director for the Arkansas YMCA in Little Rock, Funk had no idea that it would be the beginning of a year-and-a-half absence from Rogers. He edited the *Trench and Camp* at Camp Pike, then served in France as athletic director for the 30,000-man 29th Division of the U.S. Army.

When Funk returned to Rogers in 1919, he bought his father's half-interest in the *Democrat* and concentrated on making it a success as a model small-town weekly. Over the years he used his bully

pulpit to wage various personal campaigns such as the curtailment of free-roaming hogs in the downtown area. In an effort to improve community hygiene he once pleaded, "Now that we have a modern up-to-date clean post office, for the love of Mike, let's keep it that way. If you have to spit, do so before you go in." Funk's dry sense of humor often came through in his writings. He once remarked that "one of my great delights in meeting the old time settlers was their hesitancy at giving you a direct answer.... When a farm house was destroyed by fire I asked a neighbor, 'Couldn't you save anything?' He studied a moment and replied 'Well, we might have saved the cellar – if they had had one.'"

Year after year the newspaper won state and national awards, three times being selected as the best weekly in the state. When asked why his readers loved him and his paper, Funk replied, "I am not interested in having my readers love me. All I ask is that they respect my opinions as honest, even if dead wrong – and pay cash in advance to get them."

Funk believed a large part of the paper's success was due to the quality of its press work so he continually upgraded its typesetting equipment and printing plant. He changed the subscription policy to pay-in-advance and never hesitated to raise rates when costs increased. Because of his efforts, the *Rogers Democrat* not only became an award-winning newspaper, but also a financial success. As Funk put it, "My aim was to give customers the best possible service – and make them pay for it."

It was through his work with the state and national editorial associations that Erwin Funk became one of the best known small-town editors in the nation. He served as recording secretary and later as president of the Arkansas Press Association (APA). By 1925 Funk was on the executive committee of the National Editorial Association (NEA), an organization for small weekly and daily papers; he later served as its president. Throughout his career Funk traveled extensively, attending conventions, speaking at conferences, and judging newspaper contests.

The convention badges shown here are just a few of Funk's 99 badges, medallions, pins, and ribbons in the Museum's collection. Generously donated by the *Morning News of Northwest Arkansas* and the Rogers Hough Memorial Library, they came to us in a pair of large frames in which they had been pinned or (unfortunately) glued to a velvet background. The frames were assembled in the 1970s and used to decorate the offices of the *Rogers Daily News*. As the paper was bought and renamed over the years, the frames stayed put, although one was eventually given to the library for display.

A peek at Funk's many badges tells the tale of a prominent, active, well-traveled man. Spanning the years 1898 through 1938, the elaborate and decorative silk and satin ribbons reflect an era long past. Unlike today's boring, utilitarian convention badges, these items are like fancy medals, elaborately embellished with colorful metal or celluloid charms and medallions depicting historic landmarks like the Statue of Liberty, organizational logos such as the APA's quill pen and scissors, and state or city symbols such as Wyoming's bronco rider or Los Angeles' flower blossom. Curiously, one APA badge has a lovely drawing of a squirrel's head. A newspaperman's joke, perhaps?

Funk collected numerous badges during his many years of attendance at APA and NEA annual meetings as well as the meetings of other newspaper organizations such as the Upper Des Moines Editorial Association, the International Press Association, and the Minnesota Editorial Association. Because of his prominence as Rogers' newspaper editor, Funk often was a dignitary at local events such as the Apple Blossom Festivals of the mid 1920s, the Ozark Trails Convention at Monte Ne, the Northwest Arkansas Fruit Growers Society meeting, and Journalism Week at the University of Arkansas (Fayetteville).

By 1929 Funk's hectic pace took its toll and his doctor insisted he slow down. Funk sold the *Democrat*. While he left the publishing business for good, he never lost his interest in the newspaper business. He continued to write columns for the *Democrat* and other newspapers. Once when a woman asked the question, "What will you do, Mr. Funk, when there is nothing more to write about?" Funk answered, "My dear young lady, so long as there are people in this world there will always be something to write about."

During the 1930s and 1940s community work occupied much of Funk's time. He was the Red Cross chairman for the eastern half of Benton County during World War II. In 1940 he became president of the

Rogers Public Library board of directors, a post he held for two decades. Erwin and Mintie traveled quite a bit, visiting nearly every state in the Union. By the end of the war Mintie's declining health precluded any long trips; she died in 1953.

In his later years Funk became known as an amateur historian, writing articles for newspapers and the Benton County Historical Society's periodical, the *Benton County Pioneer*. After Funk's death in 1960 a number of his travel diaries, articles, and autobiographical writings were edited by Walter J. Lemke, founder of the University of Arkansas department of journalism. They were published under the title *Sixty-four Years of Newspapering in Arkansas*. In that work Funk looked back at his long career and concluded that:

*[the] newspaper business has made pessimists out of men and women who began their careers as enthusiastic optimists. It's a tough old game but has its rewards if you are not expecting credit for the time and effort expended and can be satisfied with your own consciousness of a job well done to the best of your ability. I have never regretted for one minute that my life has been spent in newspaper work.*

**CREDITS:**

Erwin Funk's editorial in the *Rogers Democrat* (February 27, 1919) and column in the *Rogers Daily News* (July 1, 1950); Erwin Funk's writings, edited by Walter J. Lemke into the booklet, *64 Years of Newspapering in Arkansas* (1960); the RHM's brochure, "Stop The Press! Erwin Funk and the *Rogers Democrat*" (1994 & 2002); and a phone conversation with Oscar Boyd (2003).