

Ex-Memphian makes it to top of world of PR

By EMMETT MAUM

As far back as the 1940s, Harold Burson nurtured an ambition to become a public relations man in New York City. Yet the friendly, soft-spoken former Memphian perhaps may never have envisioned his stature today.

The 64-year-old Burson is chairman of the board of Burson-Marsteller, the world's largest public relations firm, and acknowledged dean of the nation's public relations trade.

Burson, a onetime reporter for *The Commercial Appeal*, will make another visit to Memphis Tuesday to speak at a Rotary Club luncheon at The Peabody.

On other occasions, he visits his 89-year-old mother, Mrs. Maurice Burson, and some of his numerous relatives here.

A Humes High School and University of Mississippi graduate, Burson saw his firm in 1983 become No. 1 in the United States. Burson-Marsteller had net fee income of \$63.8 million, up 26.2 percent for the year, according to the 1984 O'Dwyers Directory of Public Relations Firms.

Hill & Knowlton, which had ruled at the top since the late 1950s, dropped into second place, with \$60.8 million in net fee income. Then in 1984, Burson-Marsteller widened its lead considerably, to \$84 million in net fee income, compared with Hill & Knowlton's \$70 million, according to O'Dwyers.

Burson was enjoying life as a newsman during World War II when events led him into public relations. He had served as campus correspondent at Ole Miss, which a couple of years ago named him to its Hall of Fame, prior to joining *The Commercial Appeal's* bureaus



Harold Burson

in Dyersburg and Jackson, Tenn.

"While in Jackson, construction of the Wolf Creek Ordnance Plant in Milan became my story," he recalled. "And since I covered it every day, I became well acquainted with the chairman of H. K. Ferguson Co., the contractor."

Many publications sought news at the plant, and executives were not prepared to meet those needs. Burson was asked to take a leave from the newspaper and handle public relations for Ferguson.

In March of 1944, he entered the Army and was assigned to the American Forces Network for servicemen. Along with a young newsman named Walter Cronkite, he covered the Nuremburg (Germany) Trials of war criminals.

After the Army, Burson was asked to rejoin Ferguson Co. Instead, he opened a small public relations firm in New York, and Ferguson became his first client. A former Ferguson executive who had started an

engineering company quickly followed as a client.

In the early 1950s, Burson merged his firm with that of William Marsteller of Chicago, another former newspaperman. Several years ago, Burson-Marsteller became a subsidiary of Young & Rubicam, America's largest advertising firm.

Last year, Burson-Marsteller grew considerably with the purchase of Cohn & Wolfe of Atlanta, a big Southern public relations and promotions firm. Cohn & Wolfe continues operating under its own name. In all, Burson-Marsteller has 42 offices in 20 nations, all of which Burson visits periodically on business.

Although Burson said public relations is his life and he has no intention of retiring, he still revels in his newspaper days and enjoys reminiscing about his big "scoop" while at Ole Miss.

It was an interview with the reclusive William Faulkner. As Burson tells it, Faulkner had been writing a movie scenario in Hollywood. Because he didn't find Hollywood conducive to creativity, Faulkner asked to be allowed to work at home. The movie studio said yes, thinking he meant the plush apartment provided for him in Hollywood. Instead, he flew back to Oxford — and Burson learned about it.

The young reporter asked Faulkner if he might interview him for *The Commercial Appeal*, and the famed author agreed. As quickly as the story appeared, Burson received telegrams from *The Associated Press* and *New York Evening Post* asking him for other versions.

Emmett Maum retired last year from The Commercial Appeal's business news staff.