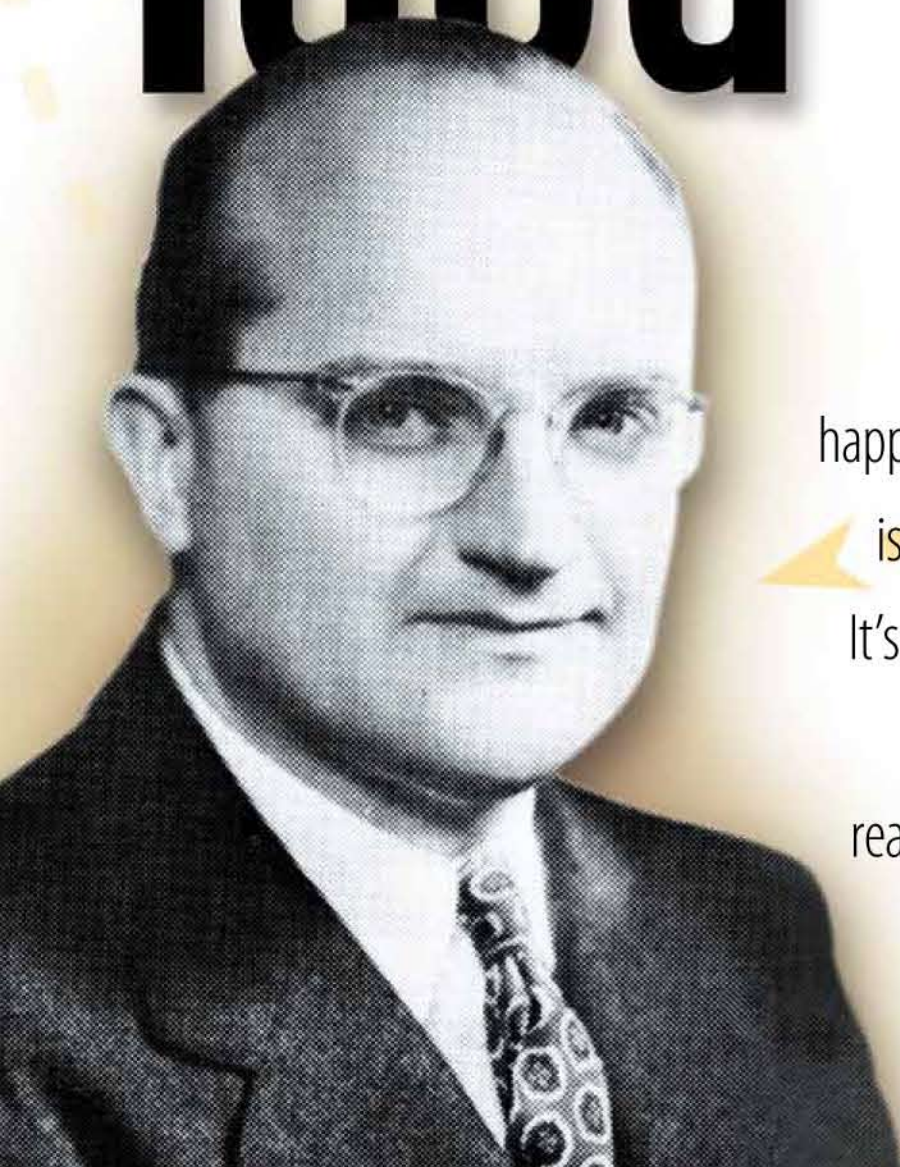




The Idea Man

by Larry Johnson



"Advertising is based on one thing — happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of the road that screams reassurance that whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay."



Half an hour into the first episode of the first season of the hit television series *Mad Men* the show's protagonist, dapper Don Draper, calms his panicky clients by explaining to them why they hired his firm to sell their products. The show is a runaway success due in no small part to the magic-wand-waving way Draper and his fellow "creatives" produce advertising in early 1960s New York.

The characters are composites but Marion Harper could well have been the model for Don Draper. Harper essentially invented modern advertising. Born in Oklahoma City in 1916, he attended Classen High before graduating from Yale with a degree in psychology. In 1939 he took a job in the mailroom at the prestigious McCann-Erickson advertising firm in New York and by the age of 32 became president. Harper had a brilliant, innovative mind and he shook up Madison Avenue by applying modern psychological principles to the creation of ads.

As a junior executive in the 1940s he pioneered the use of consumer research and hired Viennese psychologist Herta Herzog to produce reports for him (there's a scene in the same episode where Draper dumps a report from the Teutonic Greta Guttman in his wastebasket). But after his ascension to the top spot in 1949 Harper, too, dumped scientific research and trailblazed into the field of semantics.

Compare Draper's monologue to a real-life quote from Harper:

"Of all businesses, this is the business of ideas. Always has been. Always must be. Ideas are what people buy. Ideas are what line the shelves of our pantries. Ideas are what we brush our teeth with, shave with, bathe with, and dress in. Ideas are what we eat and where our children go to college. An idea is whom

you marry, where you live, what you do to earn a living. Ideas are what people buy — ideas are what sellers sell."

Before Harper, ads told consumers what products would do for them (tastes good, feels soft, cures headaches). Harper saw that as too limited and used semantics to open the ads to multiple meanings. For example, Coke's old slogan was "the pause that refreshes," but a consumer wouldn't buy a Coke if she didn't need refreshing. However, by using "Things Go Better with Coke," Harper's firm moved Coke from selling soft drinks to selling a lifestyle — you might not need refreshing, but who wouldn't want things to go better?

For nearly 20 years Marion Harper was the king of the advertising world. Devastated at being ousted by his board in 1967, he lived in seclusion in Oklahoma City until his death in 1989. Nearly all of his brilliant ideas are in use today.

Larry "Buddy" Johnson has been with MLS since 1998. Not only a librarian at the Downtown Library, he is the brilliant mind behind the Oklahoma Images database which is a collection of pictures and essays that illustrate the history of central Oklahoma.

