

Microcosm of the East End: Paper Route I

Given that my two older brothers had paper routes, I suppose it was predetermined that I also would want a paper route. I asked Robert if I could have his when he no longer wanted it. So after a rather long apprenticeship of following him around the route, he turned it over to me at the age of 11 1/2. The newspaper had a minimum age of 12 to have paper routes, but in view of my long understudy role, they relented. I kept the route until I got a job cutting grass at the cemetery about 5 years later.

The East End Recreational Center building (the Rec) was the staging center. Here the truck would come to drop off the bundles of papers every day at about 4:00 pm. As soon as the truck came into view, someone would yell, "Rags!" and we would drop our ping pong paddles or pool cues or checkers and storm out of the building to retrieve our bundles. Each person had a perch on which to set the bundle and begin folding the papers. Route 8, my route, by custom was allotted the limestone ledge underneath the portico of the main door at the top of the steps leading to the main entrance door. For some strange reason, these main doors remained locked, and the entrance door that was unlocked and used by all was a little side door. Bierman had the perch on the other side of the door. These were the premium locations because the roof provided shelter from any rain or snow that might fall while we were folding the papers. There were two more pairs of ledges on the way up that were owned by other routes. Then there were various third-rate locations scattered about the other entrance door. It says something about the value of custom or ritual, that in spite of the young age of the new owners of the routes, the locations to fold papers stayed with the route without challenge from the other older paper boys.

It was always a matter of pride as to who could fold the papers the quickest and get under way. It only took a few seconds to fold ten papers and then pause to put them in the bag. Setting them in stacks of ten assured us of the count, so we would know immediately if we were "short" and needed to negotiate with someone who had an extra. I usually ordered an extra copy in case I ever got shorted, or received a mangled paper. It was nice to arrive home, rest in an easy chair, and read my own newspaper. While we folded newspapers, there was an incessant chatter, joking and teasing. This chatter no doubt showed the limits of our knowledge and misinformation, and would have been worth a sociological study of what boys learn and when and how. There was always a lot of good-natured jostling and rough housing. We all had to learn the limits of what was tolerated or not. George had the ledge below mine. He was a couple of years older and of course much bigger than I was. In our incessant banter, I couldn't help testing his patience with wise cracks and not-so-veiled insults. So occasionally, he would have enough and declare, "Now, that's an act of war!" And he would march up the steps to rub my hair or punch me in the arm. Not so hard as to forestall more insults the following day. The newspapers came with 14 pages, which was too light because it made

them easy target for gusts of wind to blow away from customer's sidewalks. Eighteen or 20 pages was ideal. Easy to fold, carry and throw. Twenty-four pages, Thursday's typical fare, made for a bag that was too heavy and unwieldy on the bike.

With the bag of papers safely in the steel mesh basket attached to my handlebars, I was off to pedal around the 7 square blocks of houses and throw the newspapers as far up the sidewalk as I could without having the paper unfold. An unfolded paper would invariably blow away. One hundred and eighteen papers to be safely delivered five days a week. If it was raining or snowing or windy, it meant putting each paper safely in the screen door or porch door. When the cost of seven cents a copy went up to 8 cents, one customer quit. And to think of what we pay for our news nowadays. Winters were a challenge. We had to cover our ears to keep them from freezing, and the best things to keep the hands warm were choppers: leather mittens with wool mittens inside. I discovered some old felt boots of my father's or uncle or grandfather – all who had lived in the house. They were the best. I put rubber boots on over them and so equipped, my feet never got cold.

Pay was good. Something around \$7.00 a week. My allowance earlier was 25 or 50 cents a week to give some perspective. I had money for the movies, for camping gear, to buy a couple of boats and keep them running and to put money away each week in my bond account at the bank. Ultimately, the bond funds went to pay college costs. So I guess I lived the myth that newsboys learn about how capitalism works. We bought the newspapers; then we sold them to our customers for something like a penny a newspaper profit. To get our little profit and to pay the newspaper we had to collect from the customers. That pretty much meant knocking on 100+ doors every week. That is where the real education lay.

I would collect from a third of my customers on Thursday and Friday after papers, then on Saturday morning. Some happy people would pay for a month in advance and tip me – a double payoff. Some grouchy folks seemed reluctant to let go of their money or even answer the door. My big lesson came when I was too ill to collect one week, so I had to ask for two weeks payment the following week. It was so hard to convince a few that they had not paid the previous week. Most people were good natured and appreciated my service. Bar owners were generous. Jerry Rompa of Jerry's Bar gave me a tip and paid for home delivery as well. He let me park my bike in the back yard of his house while I made collections. This was an arrangement that my brother had worked out somehow. On Friday evenings, Jack's Bar near the Athletic Club had men standing two deep drinking at the bar. There, I was invariably rewarded with two candy bars. Jack also paid for his daughter-in-law's paper next door. He was a jovial type who was always looking to hear some comment from me. One time, a bar patron teased him by asking why he was late paying for the paper, not knowing that he was paying for the delivery of two papers. So Jack just nodded to me to come up with the answer. I replied,

“What makes you think he is paying late?” to the roar of laughter of the two rows of men at the bar.