

33 A Page from my Working Life:
The Newspaper Division of the NY Public Library

In September 1942, I entered Stuyvesant High School, and since Stuyvesant ran on a split session, it meant I could easily hold down a part-time job. I had graduated from junior high school the previous June, and after looking for a summer job for a month and a half, finally found one at a millinery factory for the last three weeks of August. I had my first taste of paid employment--at \$8 a week. Now, at 14, I could work part time with the blessings of the US Department of Labor and the NY Board of Education.

Freshmen and sophomore students at Stuyvesant attended the afternoon session, from 12:45 pm to 5:30 pm. Juniors and seniors were in the morning session, which ran from 8 am to 12:30 pm. Those of us from junior high school entered as sophomores, which meant we were in the afternoon session. Early the next morning, after my first day of school, I headed for the Employment Office to check the job postings. The one that caught my eye was for a page in the Newspaper Division of the New York Public Library. It sounded classier than the errand boy and clerk jobs, and it was located at 137 West 25th Street. Stuyvesant was at 345 East 15th Street, less than a mile away—10 blocks north and five blocks west. I could walk there in 20 minutes.

I filled out the Employment Office forms, was given the 3 x 5 card with the job information, and headed for West 25th Street: Up 14th Street to Union Square, then right on Broadway to the Flatiron Building on 23rd Street and 5th Avenue, then up 5th Avenue to 25th Street and west to 6th Avenue to the nondescript building that housed the New York Public Library's Newspaper Division. I expected some distinct architecture. All the libraries I knew had impressive entrances, columns, large doors and windows, something proclaiming that it was a library. This was a factory building, no different from any of the others on the street. I opened the door and on the inside wall was a directory which indicated that the Newspaper Division was on the second floor, and the Library for the Blind was on the seventh floor. That was it.

I rang for the elevator and told the elevator man that I wanted to go to the Newspaper Division. I felt silly taking the elevator for one flight, but there was a locked gate at the bottom of the stairs. The elevator man wore a powder blue uniform, short jacket and slacks. I later found out that his name was Lester. There was also a freight elevator operated by Ben who did not wear a uniform. Over the next three years, the elevator men, Ben and Lester and I became very good friends. I exited the elevator onto a reading room which contained two rows of four long oak library tables with four oak arm chairs on each side. Two of the tables had the centers built up so that large volumes could rest against them. There was a long counter to the left of the elevator and a man was standing behind it. I went over to him and asked for the director, Mr. Louis Fox, explaining that I was applying for the job that was posted at Stuyvesant.

I was directed to Mr. Fox's office in the rear of the room. The office contained two desks, several chairs, a large work table piled with books and newspapers, and lots of boxes. Mr. Fox greeted me and said that he has always been pleased with the responsible

young men who worked for him who came from Stuyvesant. After a brief interview, I filled out a NY Public Library job application form and was told about the hours, the wages and what was expected of me. I was to work from 9 am to 12 noon Monday through Friday. If all went well, I would work from 1 pm to 5 pm when my classes switched to morning session. My starting salary was 37 1/2 cents an hour. Minimum wage was 40 cents but the library, as a non-profit institution was exempt. The difference came to 37 1/2 cents for the week. Big deal! Working for the library was a lot more impressive, and more “intellectual” than running errands and sweeping up in a factory. I was introduced to the assistant director, Mr. Abramson, and to the man at the desk, Mr. Falco. The entire staff of the Newspaper Division consisted of three “librarians” and three pages.

My job as a page was to bring the bound volumes of newspapers from the stacks to the readers in the reading room who requested them. After the readers had finished with the volumes, we picked them up and returned them to the stacks. That didn't seem complicated. I soon learned that it was. The Newspaper Division had newspapers from all over the United States and the major countries of the world, dating back to the eighteenth century. They were bound in volumes—one, two or three volumes per month, depending on the thickness of the newspaper. And the volumes were stored on metal shelves—the stacks-- on six floors of the library. The volumes were heavy and awkward to carry. We had wooden library carts on which we put the volumes, and they were in constant use.

When I was hired, the Division had one other page working part time in the morning and one page working full time. I officially started work the next day and Joe Bello, another Stuyvesant student who had worked there the previous year, showed me the ropes. There were charts which described where the different newspapers were located. The ones most frequently requested were on the second floor, arranged chronologically. It took me a while to learn where to find the hundreds of different newspapers from across the country and the world. I don't remember if there was any logic to their placement. There certainly wasn't a Dewey decimal system for these volumes. I believe foreign newspapers were on the 11th and 12th floors arranged alphabetically by country. And we had every major American newspaper scattered over another three floors. Bound volumes would be received from the 42nd library every few weeks and they were added to the stacks. I used to wonder what would happen when they ran out of stacks.

The procedure was as follows: a reader would fill out a call slip which Mr. Falco would review. Then he would click a little metal cricket to call a page. If we weren't stacking volumes of newspapers, we would be in the back doing homework or reading the comics. We would pick up the call slip, get the requested volumes and bring it to the reader. (Once in a great while you might get a tip.) You would then file the call slip and return to whatever it was that you were doing.

If the call slip had been filled out by someone I thought was famous, I kept it. I still have call slips from Mrs. Irving Berlin of One Gracie Square dated Jan. 5, 1944. She wanted the Herald Tribune of Oct. 15 to Nov. 1 1929 for “research for a novel.” Also Westbrook

Pegler of 230 Park Av. (Aug. 24. 1943) who wanted the NY Times and the NY Evening Mail of June 1917 “to check quotation.” The call slips explaining why it is “...necessary to restrict the use of bound volumes of newspapers. One is the rapid deterioration of modern newspaper stock. The other is the difficulty of finding space in the newspaper room for accommodation of readers who come for purposes of research in fields where newspapers offer the only or primary sources.” Therefore, no reading for “amusement or pastime.”

Occasionally, a reader wanted a copy of an article. In 1943-4-5 it was a big production, There were no Xerox machines, but there were photostats, and the photostat machines were at the 42nd Street library. It required a page to take the volume to the 42nd Street library with an order form and the fee. I always wanted to be asked. Mr. Fox knew that it was prized and spread it among the pages. We would get out a half hour earlier and be given five cents carfare to go from 23rd Street to 42nd Street. (I would usually walk if it was good weather and save the nickel.) The Main Library was a beautiful building, and I loved running up the stairs between the lions on Fifth Avenue. I entered the building with the feeling that it was MY library. I would go to the Photostat room, leave the volume and the envelope containing the order form and the money, and walk around the library, examining the reading room, the exhibitions, the paintings and sculpture and the stamp collection on the first floor. On a few occasions when the Newspaper Division was closed for brief periods, the pages were sent to work in the Reading Room stacks.

I fell into a routine that became second nature after my first year at school and at work. School—8 am to 12:30 pm; lunch and a quick walk to work—12:30 pm to 1 pm; work—1 pm to 5 pm; subway home, dinner, homework, radio, occasional visit with a friend. And then the same the next day.

I spent three years following that routine. At the library, when I wasn't getting or stacking newspaper volumes, I managed to read all the comics we had, and then moved on to reading the newspapers describing different historic events. (Mr. Fox was not oblivious to how the pages spent their time. He frequently toured the stacks to sneak up on us, and to see what we were doing. We were convinced that he wore rubber soled shoes expressly for this purpose.) I learned to hate the sound of the cricket, interrupting my reading, and I learned that the reason newspapers from before the 1870s were in such good condition and the newspapers after were not, was because the earlier newspapers had rag content and the later papers were manufactured from wood pulp.

I also learned to love newspapers, the source material for tomorrow's history books. During this period, New York had seven daily newspapers (in English) and four in Yiddish. Carrying a newspaper was a political statement, and I carried PM. Also, the New York Times (on Sunday) and the New York Post, from time to time. The truth is, whenever I could, I picked up whatever paper was left on the subway.

Lifting the heavy volumes, I convinced myself, was good exercise. However, the accumulated dust on the infrequently called for volumes, wasn't particularly healthy. We were given masks to wear when we retrieved the dusty volumes, but no one wore them.

There wasn't much camaraderie among the pages. We each did as little as we could, but the work got done. The papers were brought to the readers, and were returned to the stacks. I didn't give much thought as to whether I liked my job or not. It was a job. I got paid. The few dollars I brought home was important. It covered my carfare, lunch money, spending money and added to the money my mother earned. Though most of my classmates worked, there were some middle class kids that didn't, and I always thought it was funny that they would ask me for a loan. I had money and they didn't. I never hesitated, knowing they would pay me back.

There was a moment when I thought that being a librarian would be an interesting job, but thinking about it some more, I felt that too much of the time would be spent away from people, and you would have little impact on the world around you. Teaching was more relevant, I concluded. None of the Newspaper Division staff was much of a role model—not Mr. Fox, Mr. Abramson and certainly not Mr. Falco. The fact is, I felt closer to the two maintenance men—Ben and Lester. They really were my friends during the three years I worked at 137 West 25th Street. When no one was around, they let me run the elevator, and we talked about sports and politics.

In June 1945, I graduated from high school, and I said goodbye to the Newspaper Division. That summer, I got a job as a junior draftsman at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, but that is another story.