

THE ELUSIVE DOLLAR

By Fred Hobbs

The concept of working and making my own money was introduced to me reasonably early in life. The value of a dollar would become evident, but it would behoove me to be aware of the workings of the work world in the process. Starting at age 11, I was hired for an after-school/weekend job selling Collier's magazines at Denver's Lowry and Buckley Fields. I averaged about 375 sales a week by spending time going directly through the hospitals, the mess halls and the individual barracks all over the two bases. At two and a half cents profit from each 10-cent magazine sold, a good bit of 1940s pocket change could be collected. As a bonus, coupons, earned based on the number of sales, could be used to order merchandise from a special catalog (such as a set of Jewel Tea dishes I gave my mother.)

As a teenager, I turned to the "paid by the hour" style jobs. One, at 40 cents per, was at the former Miller's Super Market chain in Denver. A carry-out boy, (called "box boy" back east.) I don't recall carrying any boxes, mostly just sacks. I hated the job, possibly because by contrast, in my magazine sales position, I worked on my own except for the few minutes I had to meet "the Collier's man" and turn over the weekly proceeds, minus my commission. At the store, the manager, the check-out clerks, even some of the other carry-out boys were, or tried to be, my boss, not to mention the customers. In one instance, while struggling to carry out two heavy sacks (no carts in those days), the sack split and a dozen oranges rolled around the parking lot. The customer, a not very sympathetic dowager-type woman, glared at me, and demanded to see the manager. Both the customer and the manager "chewed me out" in front of my fellow carry-out boys. Maybe I was too sensitive. Maybe too stubborn. Maybe just wasn't cut out for the retail grocery routine. In any case the experience lasted too days. I quit.

My next job was a lot dirtier (literally), but more to my liking. I was hired as a sweeper boy at the junior high I attended. Cleaning rooms after school, dusting the following morning. More money compared to my grocery gig (45 cents an hour.) Each boy had his own set of assigned rooms. There were some perks. We could shoot baskets and use the shower after we finished. The boy who cleaned the office used to ditch school frequently. He was a good typist and often would re-type the official absentee list from previous days omitting his name. And then, of course, with no females around, we were free to sneak a peak inside the girl's lavatory to see what mysteries we would find. To our chagrin, not much excitement there.

In college, my first job was as a breakfast cook in the girl's dorm. No cash involved, just signing a receipt for room and board. Then, I was fortunate to get my first paid broadcast gig at the local Boulder radio station. I had as a goal someday making a dollar an hour. But it was 1951. And the rate was 75 cents. After working there about three months, the boss called me in his office to compliment my work and tell me he was raising my pay to 85 cents an hour. Thinking to myself that I was pretty special and greatly talented to get a raise so soon, I thanked him profusely. As it turned out he didn't deserve quite so much "profusefulness."

Still reveling in my good fortune, I left his office and went directly into the newsroom, tore off the latest news from the Associated Press Wire. With no time left by then to even look it over, I went on

the air reading the copy “cold.” The third line down was a story from Washington which read in part: “Congress has just completed action on the bill to raise the minimum wage.”

And then I announced the details of the story: “The rate was raised from 75 to 85 cents an hour!

Angry at the boss, humiliated at my ignorance about the minimum wage and that I had been somewhat duped, I was none-the-less grateful for the raise. I began to aim for that glorious, but elusive time when I’d knock down a buck an hour.