

THE LITTLE MERCHANT

By Fred Hobbs

These days, adults deliver the local daily newspaper to homes. Most of the carriers cover large chunks of territory. Not too long ago and for many years, “paper boys” accomplished the task in their surrounding neighborhoods. Sometimes, it might have been “paper girls.” They were youngsters hired by the newspaper, not only to deliver the paper, but also to collect the monthly bill.

In an advertising class at the University of Colorado Journalism School years ago, I learned that the industry term for this occupation was “Little Merchant.” By being required to make the collections, it was assumed the paper boys/girls would learn independence, how to handle money and sometimes how to badger or cajole recalcitrant customers who might say something like “gee, kid. I don’t have any cash with me now. Can you come back later?” Both of my sons served as little merchants for a while and benefited from the experience of independence.

Flashing back to my childhood, I was fortunate to be involved in a slightly different version of an independent entrepreneur. I sold magazines, not newspapers. And not door to door. The Denver neighborhood where I lived at the time (World War II, early 1940s) was near Lowry Field. The route manager for Collier’s hired me to peddle that popular magazine of the time at both Lowry and Buckley Fields. Combined, the two bases housed nearly 60,000 GIs. A promising customer base!

Each week, after school and on Sundays I took the bus to the bases. My manager dropped off the supply of magazines in a closet at one of the service clubs (recreation halls) so I didn’t have to carry a heavy load.

At first, I relied on obvious sales approaches such as selling the magazines to the guys lounging around the service club. But I quickly learned there was more...much more...opportunity for increased sales. The base hospitals, for example; a true captive audience there. I would go bed to bed and instead of one soldier buying a magazine and sharing, by taking the product directly to each man, I might sell six or eight in a given hospital ward. In the wards with contagious patients, the nurses would meet me in the hall and take a short stack of magazines and a few minutes later bring the money back to me. They seemed to enjoy doing this for an 11-year old “huckster”!

The routine was similar in going through the barracks on Sunday mornings. Why Sunday? That’s when many of the men were still in bed or otherwise taking it easy.

By using these techniques, I was able to sell an average of 300 Collier’s a week

(less at the end of month; more just after payday.) At two and a half cents profit from the dime cost, a kid could make a tidy sum. Coupons good for catalog merchandise also were given for X number of sales. I managed to acquire enough “goldies” to buy my mother a set of Jewel Tea dishes.

The independence gained from this venture helped shape decisions in my later life. Somewhat sadly, I must observe that today’s 11-year olds, living in a more fast-paced, complicated world, most likely do not have such an exciting, valuable opportunity.