

The Old Time Composer Worked hard - Hard Played Hard. To Him The . . .

WAYZGOOSE WAS THE EVENT OF THE YEAR



He was, he said, a linotype operator.

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HE was one of the last of the old tramp compositors-cum-linotype operators-cum printers. Once upon a time they were a numerous tribe; today they are as outdated as movable type in newspaper headings.

Unerringly he approached the traditional enemy of his kind.

"You want a compositor," he said, telling the printer, rather than asking him.

"We've got one."

"You want a machinist," he demanded.

"We've got one."

"Then," he asserted, with the desperation of one who simply must have work, however lowly, "d'you want an editor?"

That story has raised many a laugh where newspaper types gather and inevitably talk shop. It is not apocryphal. It was an actual happening in a small newspaper office in the back country of New South Wales and was told to me by one of the nomadic tribe of compositors who after worldwide experience became one of the Weekly News staff.

Confidence

THESE old tramps would walk into print shops or newspaper offices with a quiet confidence - almost an arrogance - born from the knowledge that they were journeymen in every sense of the word, that they were as good at their craft as man could be.

They took offence easily, many of them; they were as proud of their skills as hawks. And they could drink. Indeed yes . . .

One such character appeared before the printer of the Weekly News one morning, not long after the turn of the century. He wore a shirt, pants and shoes without socks. He and the demon drink were obviously bedfellows. The bloom of the hop blossoms was apparent on his cheeks and nose.

He said he was a linotype operator. Such a linotype operator as never was seen setting type in all the colonies. In other words, he was good.

He has come ashore from the San Francisco mail packet a few days previously, nattily attired, with money in his pocket, had fallen into bad company, been "rolled" of money and clothes by his drinking companions, missed his boat to Australia, and he needed a job. He talked himself into one.

And while all the nine other operators who comprised the total mechanical typesetting staff of the Weekly News of the time peered round corners and marvelled at the shower of flashing brass matrices which fell and assembled at such wizard fingering as they had never dreamed of, no one thought it even passing strange that the copy which was being set into type by the tramp was the weekly sermon, without which no respectable paper ever went to press, or that the subject of this particular sermon dealt with the "Evils of

Alcoholic Liquor."

Anthology

THIS nomad brought with him an anthology of newspaper stories. He swore that he had worked on the small-town Mississippi State Journal which had published prematurely the death notice and obituary of one of the town's most prominent citizens. The editor had heard the news less than an hour before the paper was put to bed.

Actually he committed one of the cardinal sins of journalism - he had not checked the story. But he still ran it.

And while he may not have been one half of a duel the next morning, he was threatened with a horse-whipping, one of the more favoured forms of public humiliation in the State, and it was demanded by the irate and very-much-alive object of the obituary notice, that a retraction of the news and an apology be published in the next week's issue.

The editor was adamant. The published word can never be retracted, he said. Nor would he admit that his journal had made a mistake. But with a buggy-whip being flourished within inches of his imperial purple nose he agreed that the paper would make some form of amends. It did.

A week later, beneath the heading "Births and Deaths" there appeared the following: "Strathcombe, Ezra Jacob. Died October 2, 1901; reborn October 9, 1901."

On being given a job on the Weekly News of those days this character has achieved something which previously was thought to be impossible without the aid of dynamite. With maybe one exception, the staff had learned their trade from the journeymen before them and they were jealous of their reputations as craftsmen and of the reputation of the paper on which they worked.

Entree

TO have been a journeyman on the Weekly News was to have entree to any paper in the world, it was said. And the old-timers believed that, just as they believed that their paper was published every Wednesday and come hell or high water, their paper would be on the streets because the public, the subscribers, believed it would be on the streets every Wednesday.

These were men who, like generations before them, had been indentured apprentices to the craft of typesetting by hand - before Ottmar Mergenthaler produced his first linotype, the mechanical typesetter which revolutionised the newspaper industry.

As apprentices they were taught the "trade and business; they were provided with good and sufficient diet,

lodging, washing, medicine and all other necessities fit for an apprentice" and they were even paid a few shillings a week.

In return they worked 48 hours a week, contracting not to enter (presumably the greatest of all evils) "matrimony, nor embezzle, waste or lend, or play at cards or other unlawful games or bet or haunt or frequent public houses or taverns but in all things demean himself as a good and faithful apprentice ought to do."

A boy's first confusing weeks in a newspaper office. The cases of type - the Bodonis, the Goudy, the Scripts, the Gothics, the Caslons, the infinite varieties of the Chettenham workhorses. The very terms: the quoins, the footsticks, the quadrats.

And the smell! Ink, paper, that witches' brew lye, and above all, dirt. Windowsills deep in dust, dead bugs and occasional old letters of type. Many a printer's devil believed that purgatory could never be so grim as a composing room.

Until comparatively recent times the Weekly News employed three apprentices. And three only. They held copy for the readers, they swept floors, they cleaned lavatories, they gave cheek, they were clipped on the ears (sometimes over the other end), they thought the journeymen were next to God, they learned that the printer was God.

And gradually they also learned "the case," that jigsaw contraption in which movable type was contained, by "dissing," or distributing used types. Inevitably as "devils" they made the acquaintance of the "hell box," that satin-inspired punishment for unruly boys, wherein was thrown every ill-assorted letter, space, rule, every adjunct of a compositor's craft which had strayed from its case into the "hell box" awaiting distribution.

Pieceworkers

HE learned his craft - and its traditions. And he became proud of both. Even as an apprentice he served part of his six years "time" on night shift among those superior beings the pieceworkers, setting the New Zealand Herald by hand. Every good boy aspired to become a pieceworker - some day.

But before then he remained, as an apprentice, one of the lowest forms of life inhabiting a newspaper office. It is told that one of the duties of the night shift apprentice in the hand-setting days was to take a billy (about the size of a milking bucket) to the Metropolitan Hotel, 50 yards from the office, where it was filled with beer, (for 1 shilling) for the comps' supper.

It was well-established practice until one very naive youth "spilt the beans" to his parents that the previous night - his first on night shift - one chore had been to visit the Met.

It was a breach of his indentures, they

proclaimed. Furthermore, the boy was under age. Furthermore, what sort of men would send an innocent youth into a hotel at night?

An innocent youth? In a newspaper office? The protest sparked off a fine how-d'ye-do. There was no talk of strike, or even an insurrection. Actually, the story today has no ending. But one thing was sure: the compositors would have their beer!

Journeyman

BUT eventually all good things come to an end. Even a six-year apprenticeship. And the newly fledged journeyman, admitted to the companionship of the chapel - that embryo union, so-named because Caxton set up the first printing works in a chapel of Westminster Abbey - if he was both lucky and good enough, would be allocated a "frame," usually by flickering gaslight and a few inches of candle, and he became a pieceworker, handpicking type for the news columns of the New Zealand Herald and Weekly News.

Or he became a grasshand. To be a "grassy" was an ideal occupation for a young single man. Particularly in summer. He would appear in the office in the early afternoon and if a permanent employee was to absent himself for a night's work, his "frame" went to the first grasshand available. Otherwise he was "turned out to grass" for that day and night.

One old "grassy" told me that for four years he wanted nothing better. He would get three to four nights a week, earn maybe 3 pounds, and wouldn't call the king his uncle. Particularly when he could go swimming or pulling a whaleboat for the Auckland Rowing Club in the afternoons.

And then he a girl. Finis.

"Dissing"

FORTY-EIGHT hours a week newspaper hands worked in those days. But the 48 hours did not include the couple of hours spent every afternoon "dissing" the type of the previous night's paper. Under the jurisdiction of the Father of the Chapel all type was evenly and fairly distributed among the pieceworkers and it was their responsibility - indeed a necessity to fill their cases for the coming night's work. They worked hard and they played hard.

They started work at 6 p.m. They finished when the paper went to press, be it 3 a.m., 4 a.m., or 5 a.m. It is even on record that after the introduction of linotypes the "higher-ups" planned to introduce double-column introductions to one or two stories. At seven a.m. the introductions still had not been set - no operator had ever set such a long line of type mechanically without a literal error.

The story goes that the first attempt was given up in disgust at 7.30 a.m.

The first linotypes came to the Weekly News before 1900. They were the objects of derision here as they had been overseas. But when several hand compositors were given the opportunity to operate the new wonders they accepted with alacrity. And thereby they joined the ranks of the "piano players," as the scoffers and the Jeremiahs dubbed them.

"To think that such heaps of junk will replace hand compositors!" they said. "They'll be thrown out in six months and you fellows will be looking for jobs."

But that is another story . . . even if it does appear that the days of the linotype are about to be numbered in metropolitan newspaper offices.

Linotypes made possible the production of bigger papers in a shorter time. They made composing cleaner, perhaps less injurious to health, perhaps they made the work easier.

At any rate they could not have influenced their operators to play any easier. For, as with their hand setting forebearers, they day of the year was the annual "wayzgoose."

Peculiarly a printer's excuse for a beanfeast - as if printers and their minions ever needed an excuse for a beanfeast! - the wayzgoose has been brought from England when the colony was settled.

In the Old land it had been celebrated usually about August 24, the excuse being that with the advent of winter and the failing of natural light, the masters were required to provide their compositors with an extra inch or two more of candle by which to set type.

Celebration

SUCH magnanimity called for celebration - at the master's expense of course - and thereby there came into being the annual wayzgoose at which the piece de resistance was roast goose - also provided at the master's expense. Washed down with olde English ale, of course.

Well, in New Zealand the goose was dispensed with. And instead of holding their annual wayzgoose in August the Weekly News newsroom staffs and the editorial staff held their wayzgoose annually in January, sometimes in February.

It was usually hotter weather for the object of the exercise.

In horsedrawn brakes they journeyed to Howick, 12 miles from Auckland, through the green farmlands of those days. Now Howick is a city. But for the purpose of a wayzgoose 60, 70, 80 years ago it was ideal. There was a store, a post office, an Oddfellow's Hall, a paddock for athletic exercises - and there was a pub.

Even more popular was Riverhead, ideally situated at the head of the Waitemata Harbour. There was a paddock - and there, too, was the welcoming entrance of the Foresters Arms.

Almost 60 years ago the highlight of virtually the last Weekly News wayzgoose held at Riverhead could still raise a chuckle from one of the hand comps who had been present. And, I suspect, a participant.

By way of the Eden Vine, the Stone Jug and the Haupai Hotel the Weekly News brake arrived at Riverhead, only to find that their paddock had been invaded by



... Wrong Fount took off.

the Sunday School picnic of a church which still flourishes today.

Undaunted, and knowing that not all the revellers would be on the paddock at the same time, they took over a small corner, both parties treating that other with strict ignore.

The highlight of the wayzgoose was the greasy pig competition. Not only had the poor beast been literally dabbed with grease, but also some alleged wit had painted on his flanks the words "wrong faunt," meaning a size of type of particular face which had strayed from its fellows and was due to find its way into the "hell box."

Never was a pig, greasy or otherwise, more aptly named. He was released seconds before the padre clapped his hands together to start the single ladies' race, run over a distance of 75 yards, for no purse at all. And while the junior student' lolly scramble was in progress too.

Possibly seeking ecclesiastical sanctuary, Wrong Fount took off. He upset the single ladies when in full cry and the others in the field became surrounded with Whirling Dervishes from the wayzgoose. The lolly scramble disintegrated and Wrong Font was swimming furiously in the direction of South America.