



Read all about it!

In last week's story, I mentioned as an aside the fact that I had a paper delivery route when I was a boy, and that of course started me off on thinking back to those days. For Japanese readers, it's always a surprise when they hear about children having 'paper routes', because here in Japan delivering papers is a normal occupation for adults. But in Canada - at least in those days - it's done by young boys, each one with a particular territory to take care of.

In my case, it was an evening paper that I delivered, so the work was something I did after school every day (it was six days a week; there was no Sunday paper). My route consisted of one side of a mid-town residential street, for a distance of about three city blocks, and included a couple of tenement buildings. (If there are any Winnipeg residents among the readers, I can tell you that I had the east side of Howe Street, from Portage Avenue down to the river.) I think perhaps there were 70~80 customers in all. Every day at the assigned time, the delivery truck from the printing press came along the main road, dropped a tied bundle of papers off at my corner, and then continued on its way. My job - in theory - was easy; put the papers into wide canvas shoulder bags, and deliver one to each of the subscribers on the street.

But those papers were heavy! And I was just a skinny little kid. There was no way that I could carry them all, so I had to make multiple trips up and down the street back and forth from the drop-off point. My parents helped out by finding me a big heavy second-hand bicycle that had a huge steel basket on the front. I couldn't possibly ride it when there was a load of papers in the basket, but I could push it along, and it was a great help.

I was a conscientious boy, and did the job quite well; I carefully folded each paper in thirds, tucking it into itself, and enjoyed launching each one from my position on the sidewalk right up onto the house porch. If I missed, and the paper ended up in the bushes, I would always retrieve it. On rainy days, I took the extra time to carefully tuck each one safely behind the screen door, away from the weather.

The real downside of the job though, was the money end of it. Every two weeks I received a bill from the newspaper company for all the papers, which I to pay. I then had to go along from house to house collecting payments from the subscribers. I paid a wholesale rate for the papers of course, but the margin was very small. If one of the customers didn't pay their bill for that two weeks, I was out of pocket for the entire amount.

It was a tough system for the kids, and it was worse in my case because I was so shy; when people fell behind, it was very difficult for me to ask them for payment. One particular case I remember well, a 'little old lady' who had been supportive of our boy scout troop. Because of that support, I found it difficult to ask her for money, and ended up 'letting it go' many more times than I should have. If everybody had paid their bill, I would have ended up with about \$7 in 'profit' every two weeks, but there were plenty of times when I was completely in the hole, and ended up with nothing.

All in all though, it was 'good for me', and I think the discipline of having to be there every day and do the job properly, rain or shine, is one that all kids of that age should experience. I doubt that it actually changed my character much, because even now when customers fall behind in their subscription payments for my woodblock prints, I still find it very difficult to approach them about it. What's that they say, "The child is father to the man ..."

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>