

Stop that Paperman!

Tim Bennett

“Cahpoht! Put it on the cahpoht! Stop that paperman!” the woman screamed hysterically, arms waving like a windmill. She stood at the end of the deeply rutted dirt driveway filled with chuckholes that a family of four could live in comfortably

Acting like I couldn’t hear her, I poked the newspaper through the half-open car window; it limply plopped down on the ground as I sped away to the next delivery.

It had come to this. A few months out of college and there I was, the “Assistant Circulation Manager” of the *Ruston Daily Leader* newspaper in Ruston, Louisiana (where it is pronounced loozie-ana). By taking a job in circulation, I had hoped to eventually work my way over to the newsroom.

My whole life I had loved newspapers since I started reading them at eight years old. I read not only the comics but Ann Landers, Heloise, all of the features I could find. Besides news stories like the grisly Tate-LaBianca murders committed by the Manson family, the papers also offered AP and UPI wire service stories with reports from all over the country and the world. My family had daily subscriptions to the *Los Angeles Times* as well as the local *Southeast Daily News* along with the Sunday edition of the *Herald-Examiner*.

The *Arkansas Gazette*, the oldest newspaper west of the Mississippi, was waiting for me when my family and I moved to Arkansas while I was in high school. In college I worked for *The Bray*, the student voice of the Southern Arkansas University Muleriders,

where I wrote a weekly column, features, news, and even helped to “put the paper to bed” before it was sent off to be printed. I loved everything about a newspaper.

Except circulation. Now I was delivering newspapers of currently unmanned motor routes in Northeast Louisiana, counting out stacks of newspapers for each delivery person, preparing newspapers for mail subscriptions, trying to motivate carriers not to quit, and handling complaints from aggravated subscribers.

The first few phone calls were not a gentle introduction into the world of customer service.

“I haven’t gotten my paper today and I want to know hwah!” the elderly woman declared. Her accent intrigued me, especially how she switched the h and the w when she said “why.” It sounded like a baby with asthma crying, “Hwah!”

“Yes Ma’am,” I responded. “We’ll get one right out to you. Can I have your name and address?”

Sometimes a customer’s call turned darkly sarcastic.

“Are y’all puttin’ out a paper today?” asked one grumpy, deep-voiced man.

“Uh, yes Sir, the paper is out today.”

“Well, I hadn’t gotten it,” he shot back disgustedly.

Once a man bitterly announced, “I haven’t gotten my G-D paper.”

“Uh, can you tell me who your carrier is?”

“Ah don’t know, some (racial epithet) wench throws it,” he responded venomously. He was referring to Route 8, a sweet, soft-spoken lady trying to make a living. I slammed the phone receiver down like it would burn me if I held it any longer

When customers had complaints, the person handling the call would write down the complaint and accompanying information on a little pink slip and place it with the newspapers for the carrier to pick up when he or she arrived in the early afternoon. Occasionally, there were gaps between the intended delivery and receipt of the newspaper. The carrier might throw the newspaper a little too high and it might end up on the roof, a dog might run off with it, someone might steal the newspaper, or it might remain in the tall grass, hidden in the yard like some Easter egg.

Apparently, the *Ruston Daily Leader* had one carrier with a lot of personality. A short blond guy with a fast sports car, Ray kept getting complaints from Mrs. Opal Jones at 423 Pine St., who daily called to report that she was not getting her paper. Ray knew he was throwing it each day. One, two, three, four, the little pink slips kept coming back around like a bad T.V. commercial.

Finally one Wednesday, Ray had had enough. On “extra paper day,” the newspaper gave the carriers 50, 75, 100 extra papers to throw on their routes to lure customers into signing up for a subscription. Although they inserted ads, rolled, rubber banded, and finally threw the extra merchandise, the carriers didn’t get any extra money, so everyone was already in a bad mood.

Ray came to retrieve his newspapers from the long wooden counter, looked at the nagging, inaccurate pink slip, gathered up the papers, and promptly dumped all of the extra ones at 423 Pine St. Mrs. Opal Jones definitely got her paper that day. Ray lost his job, but he was ready to go anyway. The story was told and retold in circulation from time to time and savored like a guilty snack.

Now my own collection of pink slips began to pile up from a Mrs. Ronnie Lee Hendrix, who wanted her paper on the carport. It said so right on the slip under her name and address, “put the paper on the carport.”

That request got all over me: I was having to fill in on this particular route because the carrier had unexpectedly quit, so my job had been reduced to glorified paper boy. At least the main boss lent me his car to drive, though unlike Ray’s, it was a compact, pale yellow Ford, definitely a family vehicle.

On this particular dirt road which looped around the neighborhood, I had to be extra careful: you could knock the car out of alignment by just looking at the deeply pitted road. I got aggravated when I realized that the long driveway that led to Mrs. Hendrix’s house atop a little hill was in even worse shape than the road. The pink slip might as well have said, “put paper on a silver platter,” or “put paper on carport after creating origami animal figures out of it.” It just wasn’t going to happen.

After the first few calls brought no response, she was ready. “Cahpoht, put the paper on the cahpoht!” Mrs. Hendrix screamed. I acted like her arm waving was like a friendly greeting and I responded with a quick wave while tossing the paper one millimeter over the property line. Then I hit the gas and got out of there.

This scene was repeated two more times. Finally, Mrs. Hendrix came running out and as I took off after throwing the little cylinder of newsprint, she lost it. She reared back and balled up her fists and let loose a deep, guttural scream like a wild animal, a cougar or a panther. Her knees actually briefly met as she released her cry of tortured, anguished frustration. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck.

By then I was wondering if I might be pursued by a pickup truck full of neighborhood toughs demanding to know what I had done to the tormented soul. I actually did feel a little guilty. Mrs. Hendrix's overreaction was a little crazy; it's not like I came from social services to seize her baby or from some company to unjustly shut off a utility without warning. Still, to know I had caused another human being discomfort or pain was not a good feeling

I hope that now a nice asphalt-covered, paved road leads up to a smooth concrete driveway, where a newspaper is being retrieved daily from that carport at the Hendrix home, maybe by Mrs. Hendrix herself, who obviously loved to read a newspaper like I did.