



Pat Mulkern, editor and owner of The Hobo News.

AN INFORMAL HISTORY OF THE HOBO NEWS

BY JACK HARRIS

Here's the low-down on one of the country's most extraordinary publications, as told by one of the staff, himself a former hobo and, as he says, "apt to be one again any minute"

ON THE 12th of August, 1934, a battered old Chevrolet containing three people from McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, smacked into a pillar of New York's Sixth Avenue elevated railroad and was wrecked. Out of the mess climbed the owner, Patrick Mulkern, and his wife, Lucy, both uninjured. The third passenger, Boomer Rodgers, originally from Texas, the Poet Laureate of America's freight-yard jungles, did not climb out; he was hurled onto the sidewalk. But he wasn't hurt.

At the time, the three had between them exactly one buck and thirty-two cents. What was left of the jalopy wasn't worth a nickel, so they thought, and the question was: What to do? As they stood there, sadly surveying the wreckage, a junk dealer dashed up out of nowhere and, waving three ten-buck bills, shouted, "Will you sell it to me for this?"

Would they sell it? They grabbed the thirty bucks, and quick, for they knew the guy must be nuts.

In a way, that was the beginning of The Hobo News, which grew from nothing to a circulation of 123,000 before it was reduced to about 80,000 by the paper board. Its home today is a building valued at \$150,000, the equipment is worth another \$150,000, and the good will is valued at \$200,000—recently \$100,000 was offered just for the name. It's all owned by Pat Mulkern, a very smart cookie who used to be a hobo and is still one at heart. And so am I.

Forty-one-year-old Pat, a ringer for James Cagney, Rodgers, resembling the screwball in *Arsenic and Old Lace* who thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt, and Lucy, a young Elsa Maxwell in appearance, looked like movie actors working in an immigrant picture as they lugged three paper suitcases through West 17th Street on that August day in 1934. They felt very grateful to the old jalopy, especially since they had sold the wreck for more than they'd paid for the car in the first place.

When they got to 44 West 17th Street, according to Pat, he heard a certain character say to another character, "Listen, Mr. Building Agent, you can take that janitor job of yours and—"

A few minutes later, Pat had found a home for the three of them. All they had to do was move into the basemant and take on the job of heaving cans of ashes outside on the sidewalk every morning and mop four flights of stairs once a day. Rent was free.

In the beginning it was all sweat and hope. Pat bought a secondhand hand-press for \$15 and started grinding out the ballads and poems. Boomer Rodgers would then run out with armfulls of sheets and sell them from a soapbox, reciting a few at a time making up his own verse. He usually mixed his own stuff with others, tying up such things as *The Cremation of San Mages* and *The Face on the Barroom Floor*.

Returning to the basemant one day, Rodgers brought with him four old-time hobos

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY JERRY COOI

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of the type that literary clucks used to call "knights of the road." One was Dan O'Brien, who, because he had been born in Dublin and sported a white beard -- at least it was white sometimes -- was known in the jungles as "The Bernard Shaw of the boes." Another was Gus Shaeffer. His jungle moniker was "Sundown Slim", and he never used a small word where a big one would do. There was also Ike, philisophical and dynamic orator of Columbus Circle. And Bozo, "the king of the Wolves", a celebrity in his own way!

None of these had to be knocked down to Pat. He had met them all on the road at one time or anotheher. So had I, for that matter. In fact, at times I was still on the road, having taken to the jungles again after a slight difficulty with a blue-eyed soprano. My advice is stay away from blue-eyed sopranos.

O'Brien and the rest of his gang had chipped in by buying a bottle of wine, which Pat considers a very disgusting beverage, and they all sat around drinking it and cutting up touches of the days gone by. That means talking over old times. Finally, Sundown Slim got an idea that a newspaper with a hobo twist was a would sell and he spilled his idea.

Pat went over to the basemant of the window, as he always does when deep thinking hits him. Bozo and Ike and O'brien huddled together with the wine, while Sundown Slim retired to attend to some ablutions.

Lucy afterward reflected that she said "If you winos would go out and hustle this poetry around here, instead of lousing-up the joint..."

Just then, Sundown Slim came rushing out, almost tripping over his suspenders, howling "The Hobo News! I cerebrate the newspaper should be called The Hobo News!" And with a wild gesture, as if breaking a bottle of champagne over a battleship, he cried, "I christen thee The Hobo News!"

It was not in any way original. An old eccentric millionaire hobo by the name of James Eads How, who had inherited millions from his St. Louis, Mo., family, published a paper by that name in 1908. When he died in 1930, he left five million dollars to keep up the 143 hobo colleges he had established in the slum districts of every big city throughout the country. His family wisely contested the will and won. The paper stopped publication with his death.

Pat's experience around a newspaper office as a young boy stood him in good stead. He had worked for the McKees Rocks Gazette, sticking his choirboy face into everything, and keeping his bandit blue eyes busy. When he got a little older and started hoboing around the country, he occasionally took jobs in publishing houses and printing shops, all of which helped him to learn the general idea of publishing and printing.

The first newspaper copy that was ground out on the hand press in the basement on West 17th Street was on one sheet of paper, folded so as to make eight pages. The color scheme of the paper could be called dynamite yellow. The first headline in big letters, that took up almost half the front page, almost shouted at you: "Fair to Fair with No Fare." That was the time of the World's Fairs—at San Francisco and New York. This was written by Dan O'Brien, who explained how to beat your way from coast to coast by riding blinds, rods, etc. There were over a dozen cartoons lifted from the best mags. Two had run in Esquire at one time.

And Pat even chuckles to this day, "The best at any price—no price, the better," as he fondles a large pair of scissors always handy on his desk.

As soon as the press had ground out a thousand copies, Rodgers, Shaeffer, Ike and Bozo would grab armfuls and hustle to different barrooms and places like Union Square, Columbus Circle, and occasionally to Park Avenue where a velveteed hand would buy one for a laugh for a dime.

Lots of people bought the paper for a variety of reasons understood by any student of human nature. First, there were those who loved to make a gesture of "Why, here,

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my good man." Others loved to buy it to shock their friends by sending them a paper with such an untouchable origin. But, most important of all, quite a number of readers bought it because they enjoyed the sexy humor of this daffy paper.

The paper sold so well that Pat bought a Kelly printing press, price \$3,200, putting \$400 down, and every three months, with Pat using shears, a new issue appeared.

Rodgers would often complain, "Dey'll pinch yuh if dey ketch yuh."

But Pat was wise. Who was going to sue a paper with an unholy name like The Hobo News? "Bah!" he rasped, as he clipped and assigned to the Kelly.

To Chicago, riding the cushions this time, went Rodgers with ten thousand copies as baggage. He got distributors interested in the paper. To obtain agents to go out and peddle the paper on the streets, he'd always get a bed in a 25-cent flophouse and take his cap off and there in the room, where the flopperos would congregate, start counting a lot of dimes and quarters—twenty dollars worth acting as bait.

"Dem bums' eyes wud pop out," Rodgers remembered, "and den dey'd ask, 'Where'd yuh git all dat dough, Bo?' And I wud say, 'Sellin' dat phony paper The Hobo News.' Den and dere, dey'd become salesmen."

Working the Flophouse Circuit

Rodgers would then go to Detroit, Cleveland and other large cities, duplicate the stunt, and in a short time The Hobo News appeared on newsstands, besides being advertised from arm to eye by peddlers in the streets and barrooms. That's the way it's still being sold, and Pat thinks he's got the best



Georgina Campbell, who writes a column called The Wandering Mind

distribution system ever invented. It costs him two cents net to produce The Hobo News, and the newsstands pay six cents, no returns. The peddlers pay four cents, and no returns, either, but Pat kindly dates every issue way ahead, so the boys won't get stuck with old copies.

Pat's got twenty guys peddling his paper in New York, and they and the newsstands get rid of 35,000 copies there each and every week. About the same number of peddlers are working in other big cities. There's also a large sale of papers made by bums who pick up abandoned copies and peddle them for drinks. Pat don't get anything out of this, and he don't like it. He's trying to figure out a way to stop it.

The paper changed its policy in several respects not long after Rodgers went out on the road, and Pat hired a publicity director, Harry Baronian. He had strong ambitions to be an editor and a writer, and agreed to work for Pat for a few bucks a week if Pat would publish some articles by him. But somehow or other nothing Baronian wrote ever got into print. "I'm saving Harry's stuff for the revolution," Pat used to say. Baronian had spent years studying sociological problems and wanted to uplift the Bowery derelicts, which Pat thinks is like trying to make a lady out of Broadway Rose.

Baronian's salary was short, but that did not faze him, because Pat promised him a huge bonus when things began humming.

"You know me," said Pat, and he even says so to this day if you are a sucker believer. "When I make money, you'll get yours. Let not the two of us worry about it."

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Pat got the idea of soliciting original articles, poems, stories, etc., from different struggling writers. Price, fifty cents for poetry, a dollar for cartoons, and two or three dollars for articles and stories. A writer who got the enormous sum of \$3 for a story called *The Hell with Hitler*, gave Pat an idea, and the next headline, front page in very large type, was *The Hell With Hitler*. After that, another one: *Mussolini Goes Nuts*.

In two issues he carried advertising, but he cut it out. Even to this day, when anybody asks, "Why not carry ads?" and there are plenty of requests, Pat says, "What? And let a lot of patent-medicine guys tell me how to run my paper?"

Recruits came in. The Brakebeam Kid, Seldom Seen, Boxcar Annie, Hobo Benson, afterward crowned King of the Hobos, and other genuine products of the road, volunteered to sell the sheet.

On September 4, 1942, after four years of struggling in the basement on West 17th Street, Pat Mulkern pushed back the barrel which he always used for a chair, pulled a cigar out of his baggy pants pocket, lighted it slowly and comfortably, and asked of Harry Baronian, "What have we got in the bank?"

When Baronian told him \$18,000, the answer threw him into a reverie.

"We're goin' to move uptown," Pat said. "We're goin' to spread out amongst the swells. I've rented a new spot. Close the shop. Everybody out. We're goin' to celebrate."

The new home of *The Hobo News* was 105 West 52d Street, rent \$300 per month, no lease. They moved into the place as soon as Pat recovered from his celebration and the most recent of a coming series of his domestic struggles with his wife, Lucy, who objected to a particular crony of Pat's, Pete Roth by name.

Two-Bottle Bodyguard

Pat likes Pete as a drinking partner. He calls him Churchill. It's the Irish in Pat. He bought Pete a black Homburg, and with Pete's round face, he does resemble the great Englishman, except when Pete talks, and then you'd swear he was Tony Galento. All he's called upon to say is, "I'll moider the bum if he tries to touch ye, Pat."

The new home, in the heart of the nightclub district, was a splurge. Bright neon signs lighted up the window, and a mint-stick-candy awning that Pat had bought for \$200 swung down from the top. On each side of the awning, in bold letters was *The Hobo News, a Little Fun to Match the Sorrow*. That was an outer touch. Inside were signs like *No Papers Sold to Bums, Mission Stiffs* (that means bums who attend missions for a bowl of soup and get reformed) and *Jungle Buzzards* (a name for tramps).

There were desks for Baronian and several others, and a roll-down for Pat with a sign on it: *Don't stare at the publisher. You may be crazy yourself some day.* Pat's desk was and is today loaded with manuscripts, socks, shirts, cheese, all kinds of belly medicine, cigars and always a bottle of whisky.

The office not only had a sumptuous telephone switchboard, but a big swinging door. Pat had bought another Kelly press, this time for \$4,000, a linotype machine for \$6,000 and a huge, expensive press that set him back \$10,000, all for cash. And instead of monthly, a new issue was printed every two weeks.

He had eighteen employees working for him now, all union help, salaries running as high as a hundred per week. The pay roll was \$1,500 weekly. Baronian's salary went to \$70 a week. Writers received \$10 for stories, poets \$2, and cartoonists \$3. Pat hated to do it, telling Baronian, "I hate to spoil those guys."

Sex stuff had to be withdrawn from the paper. The post office prevailed upon Pat, not too politely.

"Okay with me," Pat said. "We'll print plenty of pin-up girls on our front page. They're morale builders, I hear."

The only touch brought over from West 17th Street was the shears on Pat's desk, where at any moment they might be used as they had been so many times before, to clip

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a cartoon, article or story from Collier's or the New Yorker or the Saturday Evening Post. Pat still believed in that old motto of his: Only the best is worth clipping. But he was extremely careful. He started publishing the paper every week now. The circulation had risen to 70,000 weekly; he was getting up among the big publishers and was well worth suing. So he had to be very careful with the scissors.

Baronian kept on writing his humanity uplift articles, but somehow or other they never appeared in print. He sold Pat a swell trick to get publicity for his paper. It's still called by the boss "the great powwow that happened at the Waldorf Astoria."

Baronian had gone to this grand hostelry, rented a suite, casually remarking to the clerk, "I expect a few guests of mine—hobos you know," he added, laughing.

The clerk laughed with him at the apparently humorous remark, but several hours later the clerk realized what Baronian had meant, for there, across the three-inch carpet to the elevator, on their way to the suite that Baronian had rented, were Ike the Bum, Bozo, The Brakebeam Kid, Boxcar Bradley, Toledo Slim and a couple of new ones.

All eyes in the foyer had turned to this motley group. A few women coming out of the elevator all but fainted, others thought it was a masquerade, but those who were very close to this collection of boes knew for a certainty that it was no fake, and ran from the scene as if a stink bomb had exploded.

The manager was brought face to face with this problem in a few minutes and the only thing he could do was to go to Baronian with his hat in his hand and almost with tears in his eyes, and beg him to leave at any price. But Baronian phoned Mulkern first at The Hobo News.

"Okay," said Pat. "Ask him if he'll okay us at the Ritz."

When they finally did leave, Baronian made sure the story was carried by every newspaper in the country, which it was, and the circulation that brought to The Hobo News was tremendous and up to brackets it might not have reached in years: 80,000 and coming out weekly. It was a grand success from everybody's viewpoint except that of wife Lucy, who had taken her role of being married to a prosperous publisher in a proper feminine way. The contact with old boxcar passengers who were coming in and out buying copies of the paper to sell, offended her, and as a consequence, she went off in a huff on an extended air trip to the Coast.

A Visit from the Wandering Mind

A lot of new writers and new reporters came to The Hobo News. One of these was Georgina Campbell, a former hoboette, so she said, of the British Isles, who called herself "The Wandering Mind." She it was who brought the first surprise interview. She had made a trip to Washington to get a personal story from Lord Halifax.

Pat, to this day says, "Why, he give Georgina the interview so I could put him on the front page. That's why he even admitted he was a hobo—you know—travelin' 'round countries!"

A week or so later, Jeff Davis, former King of the Hoboes, begged Pat to give him the title of King as he heard that Hobo Benson, the present king, was abdicating. "Can't do it," said Pat. "I've promised myself to give it to Halifax."

Not long ago Roy McCardell joined Pat's staff as Society and Financial Editor. Roy is an old-time newspaperman and used to be a big-shot feature on The Evening World. He's making things hum in the money and hotsytotsy departments.

I came along about the same time that Georgina did. I'd been trying to be a writer, and had been sending stuff to Pat—jokes and things like that—for half a dozen years, but my career was interfered with by a brown-eyed soprano. My advice is: Keep away from brown-eyed sopranos. So I never made any dough out of Pat until one day about three years ago, when I said to him, "Pat, how about starting a horse column in your paper? I'll call it Horses to Watch, and I'll predict winners, and maybe once in a while one will

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win.”

Pat liked the idea, even if he didn't know the difference between a horse and a corned-beef sandwich. So he put me on the staff. And what did I do first? I got mixed up with a black-eyed soprano. My advice is: Keep away from black-eyed sopranos.

The country was almost as horse-minded as I was soprano-minded, and circulation rose to 100,000, and Pat had to leave 105 West 52d Street. He had no lease, and the landlord gave him two months to find new quarters.

So, in a hurry, he bought a building down the street at 119 West 52d Street, for \$90,000 on February 5, 1944. Everybody laughed. “What does that mick know about real estate.”

Two months after he had moved in, a real-estate firm offered him \$150,000 for the building, and Pat started reading the real-estate column in The Times, of all papers, and wanted to know, “How long has this real-estate racket been goin' on?”

The paper was going in for big names. I interviewed Somerset Maugham for The Hobo News. He wrote 600 words for the paper on How to Become a Writer. It was good, but almost failed, because Pat, who didn't know whether Maugham was the name of a new chewing gum or a baseball player, didn't like the photograph of Maugham.

Old Wounds Never Heal

“I know,” he said, “you just told me he's a great writer, he wrote Human Bondage. I saw the picture, but I don't like guys with thin lips. They used to turn me down always when I was hustlin'.”

But the Somerset Maugham interview went in and went over big. It gave The Hobo News prestige. I had no trouble selling Pat the interview on Lauritz Melchior's advice to young singers, although he is allergic to opera singers.

“But there's a guy I like,” he said. “These fat-face guys never turned me down when I was on the bum.”

The Hobo News definitely was going higher and higher, and even newsstand distributors in the remotest districts of the country were sending in for it. Soldiers and sailors liked it. It was being mailed all over the world, even to India. Circulation rose to 123,000.

Christmas had come. Pat broke his heart and gave everybody working for him \$100. Nobody got more, no one got less. That even went for the kid who sweeps the floor. Harry Baronian asked Mulkern about the bonus promised him. Pat just shrugged his shoulders. “What bonus?”

Baronian left The Hobo News, and Dan O'Brien, with the white beard, got fired, because (of all reasons): “I smelled whisky on his breath,” Pat said.

One day Pat read an article in The Times about a man fitting Dan O'Brien's description and known as Daniel O'Brien, who had been found dead and sent to the morgue. Without investigating, Pat contacted a local undertaker and paid for a flowery send-off for the deceased.

Two weeks later who should stumble into the office of The Hobo News but Dan O'Brien in the flesh, and full of life and whisky?

“Git out, you bum!” hollered Mulkern. Later he said to me confidentially, “Could you imagine the dirty rat!” It seemed that Mulkern couldn't forgive such treachery and treason.

Mulkern was becoming a big shot now. He was getting write-ups in papers. A movie was even made called The Hobo News.

Somehow or other, Pat Mulkern drinks plenty of whisky, and somehow or other he can think better with a bellyful of it than most people who never touch it, like Cliff Mack, who took Baronian's place as editor. Pat always asks Cliff's advice and always never takes it.

“Cliff never touched whisky; only wine. What de hell can he know?” says Pat.

One night when Rodgers and I poured Pat

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into his cot, a little offside the press room, which he keeps to remind himself of his hobo days, he said in a barely perceptible voice, "I think I'm goin' in the real-estate racket. There's damn' too much trouble about paper," and then he rambled on, "that Radio City Buildin' would make a corkin' spot for The Hobo News, won't it?"

THE END

