



My Denver Post route

Chapter 7

The Paper Route

Spring, 1960

Boys, There are many lessons to be learned from delivering papers. My route taught me responsibility, dependability, and the fundamentals of running a small business. It also taught me how to deal with difficult people. Here's what happened.

I always admired paperboys. My neighborhood friend Mike Hartmiester and his brother Stevie delivered the morning *Rocky Mountain News*. Two of my classmates, Roger and Gordon, delivered the afternoon edition of *The Denver Post*. After school, I often accompanied Roger to the paper shack in an alleyway in downtown Golden. There, with seven other boys our age, Roger and I folded his papers and loaded them into canvas bags wrapped around the handlebars of his bike. I then followed him on his tree-covered route that wrapped around the Colorado School of Mines campus, throwing papers on porches and driveways. It was idyllic, riding bikes and delivering papers on a warm fall afternoon as bright yellow and orange leaves fell around us.

Six months later in early spring, Charles decided to give up *The Denver Post* route in our neighborhood so he could pursue athletics after school. Recognizing that only responsible, enterprising boys had routes and the community held those that did in high esteem, I decided I wanted to take over the route.

I told my parents my plans and they were only too happy to agree. Mom and Dad grew up in The Great Depression, so having a job and earning some money was something they valued highly. My desire to take on the responsibility of a paper route made them very proud. As it turns out, *The Denver Post* route I would take over was the route Dad and his brother Roy had delivered thirty-five years earlier. The significant difference was that I got to keep the money I earned, while Dad had turned his over to Grandma to buy groceries.

I headed for the paper shack after school and told Ila, Gordon's mother and the *Post* distributor, that I wanted to take over Charles's route. Ila said she needed to discuss this with my parents. Ila was an old friend of my parents and a Cousin Jenny. (Cousin Jacks and Cousin Jennys were Cornish immigrant mining families and their descendants. They were a tight-knit group who protected their own.) Since both of Dad's parents were Cornish immigrants, I was virtually assured of the job. Ila called Dad and the route was mine.

The following Monday, Ila delivered 72 papers to the front porch of our house. Charles arrived in short order. He would be training me and showing me where to deliver the papers. I bought new canvas paper bags with *The Denver Post* stenciled on both sides and learned how to wrap them around the handlebars of my old Schwinn so that the name of the paper was prominently displayed. Charles and I rolled and loaded the papers into the my new bags and set off to deliver them.

Charles and I covered the route as he described the unique characteristics of each customer.

“Make sure the paper is in the middle of Mrs. Johnson’s porch,” he explained. “And she hates it if you throw the paper. She’s afraid you will hit those flowers. You gotta get off the bike and walk it there,” he said while pointing out the prized irises that lined her porch.

“But it’s a long walk to the porch. It’s so much easier to give it a throw.”

“You’ll be sorry if you do,” he warned.

Later, as we looked from 4th Street across a deep ravine to an apartment building, he admonished me to get off the bike and walk down the steps to the bottom of the ravine where the paper could be tossed safely up to the second-story balconies. “See those picture windows,” he warned. “You throw a paper through one of those and you’re gonna pay for it. It’ll take everything you make for at least two months to pay it off. Don’t throw the paper from the street!”

Finally, we came to the Humphreys’ house. It was a quarter mile down a dirt road and had numerous old cars and car parts strewn around the yard. We viewed the situation from the top of the dirt road. A pair of legs belonging to Old Man Humphrey protruded from under one of the broken-down cars and a big Doberman growled and barked from under the tree to which he was chained. Several goats and a few chickens milled around an old half-buried bathtub that served as a watering tank for the livestock. Trash covered most of the yard not occupied by cars, dogs, goats, or chickens.

Charles said the dog was mean and the four dirt-covered boys of various ages who stared at us from the porch were even meaner.

“Look out for that dog. It’ll bite you if it gets a chance. And those boys don’t like nobody, especially paper boys.”

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The Humphrey boys were notorious troublemakers in town. Some were older and some younger than me. Billy, the oldest, had already spent time at the Lookout Mountain School for Boys, the state reform school on the south side of town, for stealing a car.

Charles rode with me the rest of the week, helping me memorize the 72 houses, trailers and apartments that made up my route. By Saturday, I was on my own. Saturdays were the easiest day of the week. The paper was light and I could finish the route in half the normal time.

Sunday was another story. The paper, including advertising supplements, the Sunday magazine and a thick sports section, was the heaviest of the week. Unlike every other day, it was delivered first thing in the morning rather than late in the afternoon. Dad, remembering the challenge Sunday delivery presented, awoke early every Sunday morning to help me deliver the heavy papers. We rolled the papers then loaded them into the backseat of his Pontiac. Sunday papers were too heavy to throw. He would drive slowly while I ran from the car to each customer, dropping the paper in the appropriate location on drives, sidewalks, and porches. When the route was finished, Dad would head to the dirt roads north of town where he put me behind the wheel so I could learn to drive. I was a competent driver by the age of twelve.

Now, on my own and without Charles to guide me, I rolled and loaded the papers then headed west on 5th Street, tossing papers to nearly every house on the street, then turned south on Maple Street, which led to the Humphreys' dirt road. I tossed their paper to the porch as the Doberman barked and growled menacingly from his tether. I don't know why, but that dog hated me.

Happy to leave the Doberman behind, I then headed to 6th Street and a turn east to deliver the Hartmiester's and Mrs. Johnson's papers, carefully avoiding her prized irises. Then a turn north on Arapahoe to deliver a paper to Uncle Joker's house, then a little further up the road I threw one to my mother's cousin Florence's place, among many others. Eventually I turned left on 3rd Street, and then right into the trailer court, where I wound through the trailers to deliver a few more papers. I exited the trailer court on 2nd Street, then turned left on Cheyenne and headed south to 4th Street, where I made a right turn to deliver my last papers to the apartment house on the ravine, followed by a left on Illinois and the one-block descent to home.

This became my comfortable routine Monday through Saturday afternoons and with Dad's help every Sunday morning. Things went smoothly until one unfortunate Saturday afternoon. As I turned down the Humphreys' dirt road, I noticed that the Doberman was not tied to the tree and the four boys were sitting on the porch watching me bounce along the road toward their house. No old legs protruded from under the broken-down car; the old man wasn't around. I pulled up about ten yards from the house and while the boys glared, I tossed the paper a few feet from their front step.

"Hey asshole," Billy yelled, "Can't you hit the porch?"

"Weak arm, best I can do," I replied trying to avoid a confrontation. I turned my bike around, apprehension welling inside.

"Let's see if you ride better than you throw!" he called.

I turned, but before I could answer, I saw one of the younger Humphreys holding the straining Doberman by his collar. I knew what was coming next and started pedaling as hard as I could.

"Sic 'em, Blackie," they yelled as I stomped on the pedals.

With heart pounding and adrenaline pumping, I headed up the dirt road to the relative safety of Maple Street as fast as I could go. Blackie was hot on my heels and gaining. As I approached Maple, Blackie caught me. He clamped onto the back of my ankle but before he could sink his teeth in, I kicked my foot back, forcing him to let go. His bite didn't break the skin, but it left a bruise and torn jeans. His job done, Blackie turned and pranced back toward the Humphrey house. I could hear the brothers laughing and hollering in the distance.

I was lucky that it was Saturday and the paper was the lightest of the week. Blackie would have done much more damage on any other day. Shaken, I headed down 6th tossing papers weakly as I rode. Soon I came to Mrs. Johnson's and, being winded from fleeing Blackie, I decided to toss her paper rather than walk it to the porch. It was a bad decision. My aim was off and the paper beheaded three of the prized irises. Not waiting for Mrs. Johnson to catch me in the act, I pedaled away as fast as possible, leaving the paper as evidence on top of the ruined flowers.

I settled down and the rest of the route went as usual until I came to the 4th Street apartments on the ravine. The combined effects of running from Blackie, beheading Mrs. Johnson's flowers and delivering 72 papers had left me tired and not inclined to get off the bike, walk down the steps, and throw the paper safely. I knew

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I shouldn't, but I decided to throw the paper from the street across the ravine to the shallow balcony. A perfect overhand throw was required. It had to have enough distance to clear the ravine and enough height to clear the handrail, but still be soft enough to drop onto the shallow balcony without crashing through the picture window just beyond.

I wound up and let the paper fly. It had the distance and height, but not the softness. I watched in horror as the paper smashed against the window, but because it was a Saturday paper, it was light and fell to the balcony without smashing through the window. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. As the window reverberated, the door opened and a heavysset man in a tee shirt and pajama bottoms with a cigarette hanging from his mouth and a Coors can in his hand came out to claim his paper.

"You're damn lucky, kid!" he shouted in my direction as I started for home.

Arriving home, I found Mom on the phone. "It's for you," she said with a frown.

It was Ila. Mrs. Johnson had called her and was furious. Her irises were destroyed. "You need to go apologize and make it right," Ila explained.

Mom wanted to know what had happened and I described my afternoon starting with Blackie and the Humphreys and how I had thrown Mrs. Johnson's paper rather than walking it to the porch. She seemed to understand and took me to the back yard, where she cut the blooms from five of her favorite irises.

"Take these to her and tell her it won't happen again," Mom suggested.

Back on my bike with the flowers safely tucked into an empty paper bag, I rode to Mrs. Johnson's, carefully avoiding the Humphrey place. I rang the doorbell and Mrs. Johnson opened it quickly. The angry look on her face softened as soon as she saw the bouquet of Mom's flowers.

"I apologize for ruining your flowers. I hope these will help. And your paper is free this month." I threw in the free paper in hopes that it would get me out of her doghouse. Apparently it worked. She admonished me to walk the paper to the porch from then on, and then thanked me for the thoughtful gift.

"Tell your mother hello for me," she said as I rode away.

I developed a new strategy for delivering the Humphreys' paper following the day they sic'd Blackie on me. I decided I would not engage the enemy, given the four-to-one odds — or five-to-one counting Blackie. Rather than ride down the dirt road to their house, I simply stopped at the entrance to the road and dropped the paper in

the dirt. Most days, there were no signs of life from the Humphrey house, but once in awhile I could see Billy and his brothers lounging on their porch. Whenever they saw me drop the paper, a series of threats, insults, and single-finger salutes was sent in my direction. Knowing that I could ride to safety in less time than Blackie could run up the road, I returned their salutes. That quarter-mile distance to their house became the demilitarized zone in our little war.

My new delivery strategy worked for several weeks until, after being forced to walk to the head of the road to pick up his paper, Mr. Humphrey realized he wasn't getting the delivery he had been promised and called Ila to complain. In my defense, I tried explaining what was going on, but it was Ila's position that the paper needed to be delivered to the porch and that enterprising paperboys always found a way. I gave this some thought and decided I needed to even the odds.

The next Sunday, while Dad helped me with the delivery, I told him I was having some problems with a mean dog and asked him how he handled mean dogs when he pedaled papers. Like paperboys everywhere, he too had been chased and bitten until he figured out what to do about it.

"I got a squirt gun and I filled it with soapy water and ammonia," he explained. "When a dog came after me I let him have it full in the face. The ammonia will burn his mouth and eyes and he won't come after you again."

So the next day, I filled a squirt gun with soapy ammonia and put it in my pocket. I found the Humphrey boys waiting for me. The old man was nowhere in sight. He was likely at the Ace Hi Tavern, where he was a permanent fixture. After work and on weekends, he would drink into the evening then come home drunk and mean. The story in town was that he had liked to beat his wife until she had packed her bags and left, saying good riddance to them all. From that point on, the old man turned his attention to beating the boys, Billy being his favorite target. The nearest neighbors reported hearing the hollering and screaming as he hit Billy with his belt for real and imagined crimes. More than once, the police had been called and the beatings had stopped, but usually only for a short time.

I started down the dirt road toward the Humphrey house, but this time, when they sic'd Blackie on me, I didn't ride away in fear. I jumped off the bike, put it between the charging Blackie and me, and pulled the ammonia-filled squirt gun from my pocket. When Blackie was about ten feet away, I started squirting. My aim was good and he got a mouthful. He stopped immediately, and foam began to pour from

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his mouth. He tried wiping his mouth with his paw without any relief. Finally, he turned and ran to the house yelping in pain, stopping at the old bathtub that was partially filled with rainwater. He jumped into the tub and rolled in the dirty water until the ammonia was rinsed clear.

The Humphrey boys watched in shock as their dog howled in pain. Once it was clear that he would be OK, they started after me, throwing rocks and hurling curses. Of course, I had started my retreat the minute Blackie jumped in the bathtub, so I had a safe lead.

“We’ll get you for this you little shit! You’ll be sorry!” Billy yelled as I pedaled safely away and out of rock-throwing range.

While I had succeeded in teaching Blackie what would happen if he came after me, unfortunately I had escalated the battle with the Humphrey Boys. The next day, as I turned down the dirt road toward their house, I could see them waiting for me with rocks in hand. Knowing that they were bent on revenge and that the odds were heavily in their favor, I dropped the paper in the dust at the top of the dirt road once again and pedaled on to the safety of 6th Street. They wanted revenge, but knew they couldn’t catch me that day.

Somehow, deep down I knew why they hated me. I came from a family of privilege, not Coors-private-school-family-privilege, but I had the connections to get the paper route, something they would never get. Dad was a community leader who helped me deliver my papers. Their dad was a drunk who beat them. Mom was pretty and worked so we could have a better life. Their mother was long gone.

I didn’t see any activity from the Humphreys early Sunday morning when I dropped the paper on their porch as Dad waited in the car. Apparently it was too early to extract revenge, or more likely they wouldn’t do anything with Dad there. Blackie growled at me from under a car, but now he knew better than to come out.

Later that Sunday, our family convened at Uncle Roy’s for a picnic. Fritz, Mike, and Paul were all there. We played pinochle and the adults drank beer. As we played, Fritz asked how my paper route was going. I quickly explained the Humphrey situation and how things were getting out of control. My cousins were very familiar with the Humphreys and their misdeeds. Billy was a year ahead of Fritz and a year behind Mike. They weren’t friends. While it couldn’t be proven, the Humphreys were likely culprits behind the theft of car parts from my cousin’s garage.

“What time do you deliver your papers tomorrow?” Fritz asked. “Because I’m going with you.”

The next day as I was rolling and loading the papers, Mike and Fritz rolled up in an old Ford. Mike, Fritz, and two of their larger friends were stuffed into the car.

A plan was quickly put in place and away I rode with the old Ford behind me. I turned down the dirt road and pedaled on while Fritz kept the Ford out of sight. The Humphreys saw me coming and started picking up rocks.

“Get that asshole,” Billy screamed, and the rest joined in with curses and threats of their own.

As I neared the house and just as they pulled back their arms to throw, the Ford roared into sight, fishtailing up the road before skidding to a stop just behind me. The doors flew open and four large bodies emerged — a 1960s version of “Shock and Awe.” The Humphreys lowered their arms and dropped the rocks. A few ammonia squirts in Blackie’s direction kept him under the car.

Billy tried to act tough and demanded that everyone get off his property. But he was backing up fast as Fritz pushed him toward the half-sunken bathtub. Fritz grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

“If you ever touch or threaten Choppy again, we’ll break your arms and your legs,” Fritz hissed.

Would I ever live that childhood name down? With his threat still hanging in the air, Fritz picked up Billy and threw him into the tub of dirty water.

“You stink and need a bath,” Fritz explained.

While Fritz was dealing with the older Humphrey, Mike and his buddies had the remaining brothers lined up against a wall where they were given equally serious threats. As they finished, Mike noticed a set of hubcaps stacked against one of the junk cars.

“These look familiar” Mike claimed. Upon closer inspection, his hunch proved to be undeniable. He’d found the set of custom hubcaps that he had planned to put on his old Ford. They had been stolen a few days earlier. “These are ours!” Mike yelled, accusing the waterlogged Billy Humphrey of theft. Before Billy could deny the accusation, the front door opened and Old Man Humphrey stepped onto the porch.

“What the hell is going on!” he demanded.

Never one to be cowed, Fritz stepped up to the old man. “It looks like your boys are in possession of stolen property,” Fritz stated. “Those hubcaps are ours.”

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“How can you be sure?” he asked with a sense of foreboding. “They look like any other set of hubcaps.”

Mike jumped in, “Because I scratched my name on the back of each one.”

Turning a hubcap over, the old man wiped away the dust and saw “Mike Meyer” scratched into the surface. He handed the hubcap to Mike, and walked to the tub where his oldest son was sitting and watching with dismay. The old man grabbed the boy by the hair and pushed him under the grimy water. Everyone watched as Billy struggled until finally, Fritz and Mike pulled the old man off his son. Billy raised himself from the water, coughing and gasping for air.

“I told you about stealing!” he screamed at Billy. “Get out of my sight! I’ll deal with you later.” Billy pulled himself from the tub and stumbled into the house, a fearful look on his face.

Next, Old Man Humphrey turned his attention to me. “Why don’t you deliver my paper to the house?” he demanded. After a short explanation, he told me not to worry about the dog or his boys ever again. He grabbed the remaining three boys and pushed and shoved them into the house shouting, cursing, and pulling his belt from his pants as he went. A happy evening wasn’t in store for the Humphrey boys.

Mike, Fritz, and their friends piled back in the car with the recovered hubcaps and I climbed back on my bike. “See you, Chop,” Fritz yelled as they rode away, and I headed down 6th Street to place Mrs. Johnson’s paper carefully on her porch.