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‘Crying the News’ Review: Street-Corner Capitalists

The newsboy doggedly hawking papers for pennies on city streets was once a staple of American life, an icon of unflagging industry.

Photo: Getty Images

By Edward Kosner
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Thomas Edison was one. So were Harry Houdini, Herbert Hoover, W.C. Fields, Walt Disney, Benjamin Franklin, Jackie Robinson, Walter Winchell, Thomas Wolfe, Jack London, Knute Rockne, Harry Truman, John Wayne, Warren Buffett and many more familiar names. Besides being illustrious Americans, these men shared a calling—growing up, they were newsboys, delivering newspapers to subscribers or, more colorfully, hawking them on the streets for a couple of pennies, real money in those days.

In their time, newsboys (girls were rare) were American icons—symbols of unflagging industry and tattered, barefoot, shivering objects of pity. They had their own argot and better news judgment than many editors, because they had to size up the appeal of every edition to determine how many copies to buy from the publisher. Some used hawking as a cover for picking pockets, but most were as honest as they could afford to be. Even the most scrupulous could goose trade by juicing the news they peddled: “McKinley dead!” (not just shot).

These waifs, urchins, street Arabs, ragamuffins, gamins, juvenile delinquents and guttersnipes, as they were called, now have their Boswell in Vincent DiGirolamo, a former reporter and documentary filmmaker who teaches history at the City University of New York. His “Crying the News: A History of America’s Newsboys” is an encyclopedic account of these heralds of the golden age of newspapers in America. They were essential contributors to the newspaper economy and ink-smudged secondhand witnesses to history.

The author has done prodigious research, and it’s hard to imagine what, if any of it, he has left out. Did you know that Sandy Fowler, a 9-year-old newsboy, was run over in Salt Lake City in June 1904? You do now. Mr. DiGirolamo is a fluent writer, however, and “Crying the News” is really a social history of the American press from the 19th century to World War II. Its 566 pages have their share of interesting nuggets and observations.

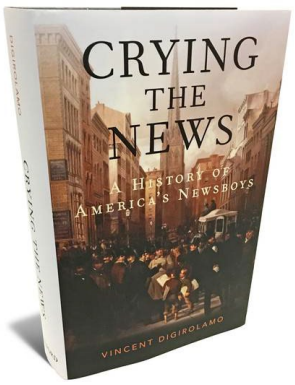

Photo: WSJ

Crying the News
By Vincent DiGirolamo
Oxford, 698 pages, $35

The book also draws a compelling picture of the squalid lives of the American poor in the 19th and early 20th centuries—stories that make today’s accounts about the economically deprived read like fairy tales. Newsboys rose long before dawn to fetch their papers from the press, then trudged the icy or steaming streets for 10 or 12 hours to bring home bags of change, the equivalent today of $40 or $50 a week. They were often the main support for widowed or sick mothers and siblings and drunken or disabled fathers. Many essentially lived on the streets, curling up to sleep on steam grates or boxes near the hot presses of the papers they sold. They were beaten up, robbed of their coppers and preyed on by perverts.

Ever resourceful, they rode the expanding railroads to flog papers. During the Civil War, daredevil newsboys skittered around the battle lines selling papers to news-starved soldiers. Their street names told their stories—"Rockaway," "Memphis Kid," "Jimmie Runaway"—and sometimes their disabilities: "Leggy," "Handy." One wore a hat reading "The Dumb News Boy."

The early newsboys as we now think of them appeared on the streets of lower Manhattan in September 1833, when 23-year-old Benjamin Day hired them to hawk his revolutionary new paper, the Sun, whose motto was "It Shines for All." It was priced at a penny and covered crime and popular entertainment—the first paper aimed at the working class. It was promptly joined by James Gordon Bennett's rambunctious Herald and more. Soon, New York and other growing cities teemed with flamboyant dailies and Sunday papers and tens of thousands of clamorous children competing with one another to sell them.

"They carried vital intelligence to a young nation of readers," Mr. DiGirolamo writes, "bamboozled them if opportunity arose, received unwanted attention from authorities, and met violent rebuke from those who disliked their message . . . retailing the breaking news that would become America's history."

The early patterns recurred over the decades. Most of the newsboys were immigrants or children of immigrants—first Irish and German, later Italians and Eastern European Jews. Girls and African-Americans were generally driven off the corners. Newsboys were hailed by the newspapers they sold as model young capitalists-in-training and beatified by reformers as viciously exploited child labor. Do-gooder groups like the Children's Aid Society looked out for them, and newsboy refuges with dormitories and hot meals were established all over the country. Still, time and again, municipal authorities and church groups harassed them over their "vices"—truancy, smoking, drinking, gambling, swearing, taking discounts from prostitutes, even spitting. They were hostages and sometimes casualties in newspaper circulation wars. Cities tried to license them with badges, and circulation managers constantly squeezed them by raising the wholesale price of the papers they peddled by half a cent, enough to undercut their meager profits. This, in turn, provoked incessant newsboy strikes and fruitless efforts to unionize them.

Mr. DiGirolamo has chosen to tell his story chronologically, and his penchant for excruciating detail results in repetition of the same sort of material with different names and dates. Still, the gray text is punctuated with dozens of vintage cartoons and photographs that reanimate the times often better than his facts.

Newsboys, as it happened, were early adopters of fake news, not only with their own embellished cries of "Assassination of President Johnson!" and "Murder of General Grant!" around the Civil War but also with the doozies published by their papers. As street sales drove profits, editors and publishers came up with fresh tricks to lure readers. At the height of the Spanish-American War, Pulitzer's New York World and its competitors splashed "Havana Shelled" across the front page. Only readers with eagle eyes noticed the words "to be" in tiny type in between.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.