

From Snitch to Scab

by **Richard LeBlond**

I began my newspaper career as a snitch, age nine, in 1950. We lived on the northern edge of Portland, Oregon, only three blocks from the cut-over bottomlands between the city and the Columbia River. This intermittently flooded wasteland had been partially filled by railroad beds, stockyards, and disposal areas for industrial waste. To a boy of nine, it was a frontier with high potential for treasure (some of it toxic), and one afternoon I found it. Down at the foot of a railroad embankment were hundreds of advertising circulars all rolled up like small newspapers.

There was no value in the circulars themselves. The treasure lay in how they got there. They were supposed to have been delivered house to house by a boy on a bicycle. I figured he had tossed them like a dead body into the early morning miasma. Delivering advertising circulars was a coveted job, one of the few a child could legally do. I took home a piece of the evidence, and dad called the distributor. I was quickly rewarded with the miscreant's job.

The circulars were supposed to be delivered in the early morning once a week. Some guy in a truck dumped a large bale of them on our front porch after midnight. Mom had to get up an hour before me to start rolling the hundreds of circulars so I could toss them on porches like the professional paperboys did. But even with her help there was not enough time to complete the deliveries before breakfast and school.

I wasn't about to devote another morning to the task, let alone a precious afternoon, so it wasn't long before I realized the practicality of the snitched-on boy's method. I began to deliver to as many houses as time allowed, then hid the overburden in more secluded areas of the wasteland. The bodies were never found, so I continued distribution of the

circulars to the local neighborhood and bottomlands until I finally got a job delivering real newspapers at age eleven.

(There is a parallel between the start of my newspaper career and the beginning for a politician—tear down the unscrupulous incumbent, then discover the job can't be done by scruple alone. "Politics," observed socialist Oscar Ameringer, "is the gentle art of getting votes from the poor and campaign funds from the rich, by promising to protect each from the other.")

In the early 1950s, Portland had two dailies, the morning *Oregonian* and the evening *Oregon Journal*. My first newspaper job was delivering the *Journal* in late afternoon, after school. The paperboys gathered at the newspaper's district distribution center, a sturdy shack at the back of a supermarket parking lot. We had to be there before the newspaper truck arrived, so there was always time to kill, and the favorite place to kill it was in the supermarket's candy section. Our goal was to shoplift as many candy bars as possible under the ruse of the purchase of one or two. Once outside, we tallied and compared the sweet ephemera.

The nickel-and-dime thievery was of course perilous, and every now and then one of us was caught. But for my group of pre-teen boys in the early 1950s, shoplifting was only a risky option, not the beginning of a wasted life. Better behavior had to compete with peer pressure, unenlightened self-interest, and the inherent goodness of a Baby Ruth candy bar. Most importantly, shoplifting reduced the drawdown of wealth I was acquiring for a bicycle upgrade.

(At the time, I was only interested in the money I was making, and gave no thought to the economic system newspaper delivery represents. We were little franchises. The newspapers themselves were actually being sold to the paperboys, not to the subscribers. Once a month the company handed us a bill, and we collected from the subscribers to pay it. The remainder was ours. Any account unpaid was the paperboy's problem. He not only received no profit on those accounts, but had to pay the company

for the papers he had delivered to the scofflaws. Yet even with the economic assistance of eleven-year-old boys, printed newspapers appear headed for oblivion.)

I became a newspaperman during my senior year of high school, when I discovered that calculus and girls couldn't be studied at the same time. Getting girls to make out requires effort and focus when competition, pursuit, and anxiety are factored in. I abandoned my dream of becoming a geologist exploring for oil in Venezuela, and amended my curriculum by replacing lonely and cerebral calculus with a very sociable course in journalism. The journalism class was responsible for writing and publishing the school newspaper. I loved sports and got the plum job of sports editor, even though I wasn't much of an athlete, breaking my arm the first time I tried to swing on rings.

One of my responsibilities after a varsity game was to call the *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Journal* to relate the score and a few highlights. That year our football team was very good, and I had kept track of statistics for each player. I began getting phone calls from the *Oregonian* reporter who covered high school athletics. He wanted those statistics for his weekly column. After a couple of months, he asked me if I would be interested in the most stupendous offer anyone had ever made to me: a one-night-a-week job as a bottom-rung copy writer at the downtown *Oregonian* building itself, in the exalted sports department.

At first, I just worked Friday evenings. That was game night. Several of us were there to answer phone calls from informants, record the scores and highlights, *and write a two- or three-sentence account of the game*. My literary career was airborne.

Following high school, I enrolled as a journalism major at Pacific University in Forest Grove, about thirty miles west of Portland. I kept working part-time for the *Oregonian*, adding Tuesday and Saturday nights to my schedule.

Thanks to the business world's chronic cost cutting, I was about to get even more work. The newspapers had recently automated another part of the printing process, causing a

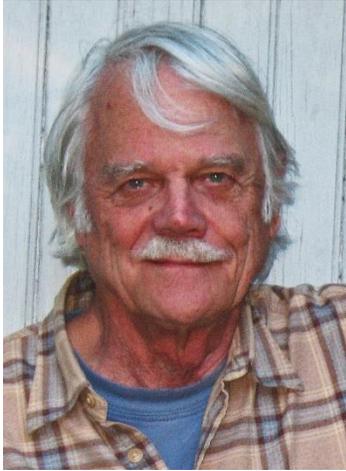
seventy-five percent reduction in the number of workers needed among members of the Stereotypers Union. In November 1959, the stereotypers went on strike, and members of other unions refused to cross the picket lines.

Managers of both newspapers huddled in the *Oregonian* building and attempted to print their dailies with non-union help. Tempers flared when non-union workers crossed the picket lines. There were fights. A newspaper delivery van was blown up. Then the managing editor of the sports department called and asked me to be part of the non-union publishing team, with a full-time job. I crossed the picket line with a bodyguard: Dad. My career had entered the scab phase.

“After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad, and the vampire, he had some awful substance left with which he made a scab. A scab is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a water brain, a combination backbone of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts, he carries a tumor of rotten principles. When a scab comes down the street, men turn their backs and Angels weep in Heaven, and the devil shuts the gates of hell to keep him out.” – attributed to Jack London, probably erroneously.

Whoever wrote it, they were wrong about my having rotten principles. I had no principles, and no politics either, so by default was a Republican like my dad. I had been convinced that crossing the picket line was the right thing to do, even though I felt guilty for it. I continued crossing the line uneasily for another two years. (The strike lasted five years before the unions finally gave up.)

Every now and then, as I crossed the picket line, I would see the reporter who had recruited me from high school. He never spoke to me, but his gaze conveyed admonishment and deep disappointment. It is a gaze that still haunts me, and in my own mythology, it was the beginning of another way to view the world.



Richard LeBlond is a retired biologist living in North Carolina. Since 2014, his essays and photographs have appeared in numerous U.S. and international journals, including *Montreal Review*, *High Country News*, *Compose*, *New Theory*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Concis*, and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*. His work has been nominated for *Best American Travel Writing* and *Best of the Net*.