

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Dailies and deposit bottles

This month marks 50 years since I was hired by *The Mercury* as a cub reporter. Fresh out of Kutztown State College with a not-terribly-practical degree in history, I had been submitting applications to newspapers with-in commuting distance of my home in Allentown.

My older brother had been a reporter for the Allentown *Morning Call*, and I figured what he could do, I could do.

It so happened *The Mercury* needed someone to sort sales slips for an internal advertising competition. I was their man. They paid me out of petty cash.

Not long after I started sorting piles of paper, sitting at a card table, they fired a reporter. There was an immediate opening.

My budding journalism career almost ended as soon as it started when my boss discovered I couldn't type. However, I managed to eke out enough copy to stave off a pink slip. (I'm still a hunt and peck typist.)

For 50 years I have kept the 1971 daily planner of my boss, city editor Bob Urban, with the names of the reporters and their assignments.

I thought I might "shadow" an experienced reporter for a day or two, or at least get some instruction.

But no. Sink or swim.

Back then, *The Mercury* ran lots of "soft" news stories — features, we called them — about ordinary people and routine aspects of life.

A little slip of paper placed on my

desk directed me to report on the future of disposable plastic soda bottles versus returnable glass bottles, which were still common at the time.

I called my brother, who suggested I call area bottling companies, grocery stores, and environmentalists.

In the days before computers, the internet, email, voice mail, and caller ID, most people answered their telephones. Companies employed receptionists who actually answered the phone.

Looking back at my first article, I am surprised at how many people I was easily able to reach.

As recently as the 1960s,

most soda came in glass bottles with a deposit of 2 cents for small bottles and 5 cents for large ones. Customers returned empties to the grocery store, which in turn returned them to the bottling company, which washed and refilled them.

There was a strong economic and environmental argument for refillable bottles.

They were far less expensive, and, as one environmentalist told me, "disposal of plastic bottles is a major problem because they do not decompose. They are usually buried and remain intact indefinitely. All we're doing is passing our problems on to future generations."

Five decades later, we all know how returnable soda bottles turned out.

We're still passing our environmental problems on to future generations, but on a much, much larger scale.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



MERCURY NEWSROOM CIRCA 1971 — The Mercury's brightly lit newsroom was easily visible through large uncovered windows facing King Street, across from Trinity Church. City editor Bob Urban, my first boss, is seated at the center of the horseshoe-shaped desk. Behind him is a dumbwaiter that carried copy up to the second floor composing room. At far left are teletype machines that provided a steady stream of typed news from the Associated Press. We gathered stories on the phone and typed them on manual typewriters. No internet, no computers, no cell phones, no privacy.