By PETE HAMILL

I started reading newspapers in the summer of 1943, when I was eight years old. In the mornings, we had the New York Daily News on the kitchen table of our Brooklyn cold-water flat. From its tabloid pages, we learned the dailiness of the world beyond our neighborhood. After school, or on torrid summer mornings, I read all of them, but my favorite was “Terry and the Pirates” by Milton Caniff. This was also my mother’s favorite, and I told her I loved it even when I couldn’t fully understand it.

Like other kids (and surely some adults), I went from comic strips to the sports section, and slowly to the stories that ran in the front: tales of war, murder, embezzlement, fame, and the madcap. By 1947, the year of the Brooklyn Dodgers, with a mad Cezanne. My mother never did get baseball. But with the help of the newspapers they had become Americans for the rest of their lives.

When I was eleven going on twelve, I started delivering the Eagle, the other fine Brooklyn newspaper. It was the summer of 1947, the year of the coming of Jackie Robinson, and some days after big games I felt like God’s messenger. Baseball, after all, was our secular religion. At the same time, I started reading the other newspapers for sale at the candy-store two doors from our tenement. The city’s dailies were all there: the Mirror, the Journal-American, the World Telegram & Sun, the Herald-Tribune, the Post, the PM, and The New York Times. I couldn’t afford all of them and not all of them entranced me. The Times, for example, carried no comic strips, and seemed gray and foreboding. And there were others: the Daily Forward (in Yiddish), the weekly Irish Echo, Il Progresso (in Italian) and the Polish-language Nowy Swiat. I loved holding them in my hands. I loved their smell. I loved the orderly look of the pages and the life that rose in such huge exhalations from the columns, even when I couldn’t read them. They were a kind of road map to the varieties of people who lived in that blue-collar neighborhood. They taught us by their very existence that there were many ways to be a New Yorker. Or an American.

By 1960, I was a reporter at the New York Post, serving an apprenticeship with some of the most wonderful men and women I’ve ever known. They were kind, generous with time and (and occasional dollar), always willing to answer questions from dumb neophytes like me. To be sure, they could be cranky. They could be acer.

HOO KED ON NEWS PRINT

A V ERY STICKY S ITUATION B ECOMES A LABOR OF LOVE

By PAT WINTERS LAURO

Most 19-year-old girls fall in love with a boy. I fell in love with the newspaper business. It was the spring of 1977, and I was in my first journalism class at Fordham University in the Bronx where I was the quiet student in the back of the room, the one who never raised her hand and whose name I am sure the professor, the Rev. Ray Schroth, did not know. I had a vague notion that I could write - an idea that my English professor did his best to discourage - and I thought I could find work as a reporter. To Father Schroth, whose own family had a storied tradition at the Brooklyn Eagle, journalism was much more than learning how to write well. Journalism was about uncovering the truth, about understanding the world, about putting issues in perspective. It was about writing beautiful prose sometimes, yes, but it was also about ethics and telling all sides of a story. Journalism was a calling, a priesthood, and its bible was the newspaper. I later learned it was also just a lot of fun.

I was introduced to the way of newspapers in my first job interview when the editor opened his desk drawer, saw his whiskey bottle was empty, and asked if I had a car to drive him to the liquor store. I did, and I got the job – as an intern at a local New Jersey paper. Everything in the newsroom was old and grimy. We wrote on big, old typewriters - not even the electric ones – and we all had small umbrellas with brushes that we used to cut and paste paragraphs in a story - just like the function we now use on Microsoft Word. The editor would then type up the copy, and it would go to a row of ladies - they were never men – who sat at linotype machines that would spit out our copy in long, narrow column strips that were then glued onto boards. The boards were replicas of the finished newspaper before it went to press. My job was to write feature stories, which included earth-shattering news like a story about a local girl vying for the title of Miss New Jersey. Later, I made the rounds on the police beat, scrounging the blotter for any semblance of news that would get me off the “women’s” pages. Not exactly the stuff of Watergate, yet I loved it. I loved the rush of the deadline, the countdown to press time, the pandemonium. I loved the big open newsroom with desks abutting each other like kindergarten classrooms and people yelling across the room to each other. I loved that every new paper was a new beginning.

I did have a problem, though. Apparently, I was allergic to the glue used in production of the paper, and I was very sick for a long time. Every time I tried to write a feature story, I would impatiently tear up the copy. I was very sick for a long time. Every time I tried to write a feature story, I would impatiently tear up the copy.
bic. And none were saints. They could craft in tales of sales and wrestling, sometimes profane laughter. But they hated abstraction and always mocked self-importance. But all of them were serious and meticulous about their imperfect craft, driven to get to the truth of a story and then tell it in plain language, full of concrete nouns and active verbs. They taught me that it was possible to be serious without being solemn. They were all underpaid, but they shared a belief that they were doing work that was very important. Simply put, democracy could not function without them. A reporter would never get rich at a newspaper, but wealth was never the point. In ways large and small, a reporter could truly change the world. He or she could get the wrong person out of jail and put the right person in. A reporter could help people who had been hampered by the city, by offering the least of them a hand to get up. A reporter could serve as a buffer between government agencies and the people themselves. A reporter could also tell you what restaurants were good, what the best books and movies were, and where on last night's ballgame.

We thought that special kind of life would last forever, and of course, as with all certainties, we were wrong. As I write this, newspapers are shrinking or vanishing. The delivery system for journalism is undergoing enormous change, choosing the Internet over paper, ink, and trucks. On the New York subways now, you see a few newspapers in human hands, including Chinese broadsheets and free dailies. But the young are using both thumbs to call up news from electronic gadgets. On some mornings, I try to imagine Murray Kempton or H.L. Mencken using Twitter but I'm always torn between the urge to laugh and the impulse to weep.

New York is over, I think. We do vanish, we will all lose something. One of the cliché definitions of journalism is that it is “history in a hurry.” This is true on several levels. You can sense the great moments in history from those old newspapers, when wars began or ended, the motivations of the war makers, the tales of the heroes and villains in the national drama, and the urgency with which the news was delivered. But in the pages of old newspapers readers and researcher (including historians) can learn much about the local, the changes in neighborhoods, the arrival of new amenities and the gifts they gave to all of us, starting with a reverence for hard work.

But there are other details to be discovered in the full pages of old newspapers. The advertising, for example, can tell us how much shoes cost in a given year, and what people paid to see a Broadway show or a movie and yes, what was playing at the Roxy. The classified advertising can tell a curious reader how much the available jobs were paying and how much it cost to rent an apartment in well-off neighborhoods or those where all collars were blue. In the classified pages, people often found careers that lasted a lifetime. And historians or novelists can still find the details of life as it was lived beyond those pages that listed the names of generals and politicians and great felons. They can even tell you what the weather was. This show displays newspapers in their glorious heyday. I hope the young look closely, and realize why they mattered so much. Perhaps they will insist on the emerging mass of the Internet deliver more than unreported gossip and flabby opinions. With any luck, they will give us hard reporting, brilliant thinking, and laughter too. The presses might stop. The need for great journalism never will.

Pete Hamill, one of America’s most-celebrated journalists, edited the New York Daily News for years. In 1993, I joined the Daily News, but per market around the country shrank. Still, I feel lucky I had a brush with the golden era newspapers readers and researchers because the events chronicled on front pages, or on the so-called “women’s page,” or in the obituaries, or on the pages devoted to local news meant something to them. The newspaper transformed an event - a death, a championship, an election into news, the raw material of history and a milestone in the life of a reader. The Livingstons and Keans were not the only people who regarded newspapers as their own personal artifacts - Sandy Curran, formerly of the Kean University Foundation, and Dave Levine, a former journalist who now teaches at Kean, also held onto their newspapers. They generously donated or loaned artifacts from their collection to augment the show. That inclination to save a newspaper - as a relic of a memorable occasion, as the source of a smile, as a reminder of youth - remains strong today even as newspapers transform themselves for the digital age.

President Obama’s election last year and his inauguration this year inspired millions to save not just a newspaper but a piece of their lives, their times, their narrative. How many of those millions thought to themselves, “My kids and their kids will read this one day, and they will know more about life in America in 2009.” Newspapers, then, remain separate and apart from the digital age’s great flow of information, good, bad, and indifferent. They are meant to be held in the hand, puzzled over, and reflected upon. They are meant to be torn to shreds by the infuriated, and lovingly preserved by the sentimental.

Above all else, they are meant to tell generations today and tomorrow what that time was like - and why - on the day they were published. They have been and remain an unfailing guide to American culture, and they will continue to be, regardless of how they are delivered in the years to come.

Co-curator Terry Gobowy is director of the John Kean Center for American History. He worked fulltime in journalism from 1973 to 2006.

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WHERE HISTORY COMES TO LIFE

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MILESTONES continued from page 1

spent my afternoons in the newsroom mostly sneezing. I thought it would end my career, but one night while interning at a local daily, an editor showed us something new. It was called a “video display terminal” and it was hooked to a giant mainframe computer located in a separate climate-controlled room. It was the forerunner to the now-defunct Paterson News eliminated 10 percent of the staff. Management said it was eliminating the “dead wood” - castaways from another age who couldn’t adapt to changes in the newspaper.

I eventually worked my way to the New York media as an editor. I’m 10 years into the job, and at the moment the staff is delivered. But in the pages of old newspapers readers and researchers because the events chronicled on front pages, or on the so-called “women’s page,” or in the obituaries, or on the pages devoted to local news meant something to them. The newspaper transformed an event - a death, a championship, an election into news, the raw material of history and a milestone in the life of a reader. The Livingstons and Keans were not the only people who regarded newspapers as their own personal artifacts - Sandy Curran, formerly of the Kean University Foundation, and Dave Levine, a former journalist who now teaches at Kean, also held onto their newspapers. They generously donated or loaned artifacts from their collection to augment the show. That inclination to save a newspaper - as a relic of a memorable occasion, as the source of a smile, as a reminder of youth - remains strong today even as newspapers transform themselves for the digital age.

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