

The *Haverhill Journal*

by Raymond Abbott



*Raymond Abbott, age 18
Taken February 14, 1961 at the
Haverhill Journal in Haverhill, Massachusetts.*

In 1960 I went to work fresh out of high school as an office boy in the advertising division for the *Haverhill Journal*. The *Journal* was a William Loeb newspaper, which to today's readers, I suspect means nothing, but then it was synonymous with being fanatically right wing. He was all of that and more, I guess. He also owned the *Manchester Union Leader*, a statewide paper, and as the title suggests, "union leader," it was

a union newspaper. As an employee of the corporation you had to be a member of the newspaper guild (which I was) of the AFL-CIO. It was a bit of a paradox to have a rightwinger, so-called, what Loeb certainly was, who encouraged unions to work on his newspapers. He had as I recall two newspapers in Vermont as well. He was actually good to work for, and by good I mean he was fair. But when you're looking at oddities, you have to also recognize that the *Haverhill Journal* from its inception was what some people called a "scab newspaper" because it entered the Haverhill market when the other daily newspaper, the *Haverhill Gazette*, was out on strike. How do you figure it? A union newspaper, what Loeb ran, trying to break a strike at another paper. Hardly makes sense, does it? But that's how it happened. I met Loeb a few times, stood next to him once at the men's room urinal. He was a little man, bald, maybe in his mid-fifties, perhaps even sixty then. I was only eighteen, so anybody past thirty looked old to me.

Loeb, affectionately called “the old man,” came to our offices on Locust Street about once a month for meetings, pep talks, I suppose they were. I remember them well. The entire newspaper staff was expected to be on hand, and that included lowly me. The sessions were an effort by Loeb to encourage a stiff upper lip, so to speak, and by that I mean to plow on in the face of discouraging reports, bad numbers, loss of readers, declining circulation, and undoubtedly, revenue declines, too.

While I was specifically the advertising section office boy, I was also used by the editorial people, and others in the building as well. Guys like Hank Price, a tough New York reporter who looked the part with a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth. I suspected that Hank and alcohol knew one another well, and his time at the *Journal* I surmised, was a part of his slide from his New York City heydays. He was never very friendly to me, but often sent me out for coffee. I always did so without complaint.

I well remember Archie Sudhalter too, staff photographer, one of them anyway. He wasn’t friendly with others and could be gruff, it seemed, but he was kind to me. He called me “Kid.” He even allowed me to watch him develop photos in the tiny darkroom in the corner of the editorial room. All the offices were on one floor and nobody had a lot of space. And there too was Dave Beat and his wife, whose name I forget now. Both were very tall and thin, and maybe in their late twenties. Dave was managing editor and his wife was in charge of the society page.

Sometimes I believed the newspaper never had a real chance of success because it was printed out of town, sixty miles away in Manchester, N.H. on the presses of the *Union Leader*. It was then trucked to Haverhill each afternoon. With such an arrangement the newspaper had to be “locked up,” put to bed in newspaper jargon, earlier than its competitor, the *Gazette*. So lots of late breaking news simply could not be reported. This disadvantage had to be obvious to everyone involved, but it was especially so to me, for I hoped the paper would survive until I entered the community college the following September, which was my plan. In fact, the *Journal* lasted that long and for several more years after my departure. Ultimately though, the *Haverhill Journal* failed and shut down completely. Curiously, today in 2009, as I write this piece, the Haverhill community has no newspaper at all. The nearest paper comes out of Lawrence, Massachusetts. It has a Haverhill section, but that is not the same as having a community newspaper, of course.

As office boy in advertising (the only office boy on the newspaper), I was initially paid \$45 a week. By the time I left about a year later, I was paid a bit above \$50, maybe as much as \$55. The general manager, Dick Becker, earned about \$500 or \$600 each week, and I knew this because Becker sometimes asked me to go out and cash his check for him and bring him the cash. I don’t recall that he had a checking account—I am not sure many did. I just handed it to him in tens, twenties and fifties. Sometimes he told me to take his car, a brand-new white Ford convertible. It was a beauty, but I don’t recall ever having the thrill of driving it with the top down.

He usually had additional chores for me to do when he let me use his car. He once asked me to drive to nearby New Hampshire to have the car inspected for the annual inspection required by the state. Sometimes I was told to have the oil changed. His car was registered in N.H., where I suppose he lived. He was casual about lending me his car—something my father never would have done—tossing the keys to me as he passed me in the hall. He never asked me to account for where I went or how long I was gone, not that I took advantage of the situation. He must have been a good judge

of character because I never put the slightest scratch on the car, nor did I take a dime of his considerable cash, or lose any of it, either. He being the boss, I was of course especially careful, but the truth is, I would have behaved the same way, no matter who asked this of me. That was just how I was made.

Becker was something of a laid back individual. He had a big laugh and liked to joke around. He was easy to work for, and I sometimes thought he was too easy because the paper never did well the entire time I was there. As I see it, it was fated to fail, but ultimately its losses seemed worse to me because everyone seemed so unconcerned about the paper's decline that continued week after week and month after month for the entire time I was employed there.

The only time I saw Becker get a little rattled was on Thursdays, a big day for advertising, and the *Gazette* would land on his desk fat with display ads, while the *Journal* next to it would be far skinnier. Then he would begin to grumble and wave his hands and insist all the salesmen come into his small office. There he would gesture anew complaining about how the *Gazette* had killed us. His office was walled in with glass windows, and while I could not hear the conversations, I would see his face, his grimaces and his gestures, and easily deduced he was giving everyone hell about how beat up we were in advertising by the *Gazette*. Yet the entire setup was a little like a club, a men's club, I should note, for there were no women salespeople except for one Natalie at the front window who took classified ads over the phone or walk-ins. But the heated sessions with Becker did not last long. Soon he could be seen leaving with several of the salesmen, leaving for the day usually, and that meant I suppose for drinks or dinner or something of that order.

One of the other higher-ups I remember was a short slightly balding man of about fifty named Gene Richards. He was jovial, and enjoyed joking around. He was also a rather dapper dresser. Most of them were. Everybody wore a coat and tie. I didn't wear a suit jacket, but I did wear a white shirt and tie. I don't recall there being a lot of colored dress shirts worn in those years.

There was a fellow named Bob Monahue originally from a Loeb paper in Vermont. He was more serious on the surface, but he liked a good time, same as the others. He looked a little professorial with his small wire-rimmed glasses. There was also a Greek by the name of Zurvis. He was thin and slight, and somewhat stoop-shouldered, though only about forty years of age. And there was the kid among them, barely older than me, Bob Houle. He was a bit stout, had a round face and curly brown hair. He was incredibly confident, or so it seemed to me.

The salesmen all had a long line of bullshit and banter and they endlessly played jokes on one another. And sometimes on me. Richards was the master, though, as I will soon show. While most of the salesmen were in their forties, Houle was the baby in the bunch at twenty-two. Nevertheless, he was treated as an equal, and was indeed the equal of the others in the amount of advertising he sold. He was one of the gang.

Richards liked to tell stories, including tales of being a fighter pilot in the Second World War. Later I was to learn he was no such thing, although he did have a pilot's license and kept a small airplane at the nearby airport. Dick Becker also learned to fly, and sometimes I think when the crew went missing in the early afternoons they were off flying someplace. I suspect Richards might have been responsible for getting Becker interested in aviation, but I don't really know.

The man I worked with the closest was Ray Fisher. A wonderful man, Ray Fisher. He, like most of the others, came down from New Hampshire, in his case from Derry,

N.H. He drove home each day. Ray was in charge of the dummy for the newspaper, which is the layout, where news goes and where advertising goes, and so on. My job in the morning, right after I arrived, was to carry out the advertising for that day's page proofs of the ads that would appear and call in any corrections. I usually called from Mitchells' Department Store on Merrimack Street. There was a kind woman there at the information desk who allowed me to use the telephone each day. She was old to me, maybe forty, but carefully groomed, I noticed, and she dressed with care, too. She had what might then have been described as a "cute figure." She was certainly attractive, but there was something about her that said she was not married, never had been married, and likely never would be. How does one come by such conclusions?

There was of course a deadline to get my calls to Ray Fisher. He was waiting, taking no other calls except mine in the morning. If it got later than 9:30, Ray became nervous and he would ask when at last I called, "Where have you been?" But he always asked nicely. "Manchester is screaming for our changes!" he would then proclaim.

I was good about getting my corrections in and was usually prompt too, but some days I had a proof for the Pentucket Bank (then on River Street) and the bank president himself always approved the copy in those days. I would approach his gated area. He sat at a desk on a raised platform like an altar some distance from the gate entrance itself. I would enter from there when summoned. I am convinced he always took notice of my entrance to the bank.

Henry Wallace was his name, balding and fiftyish (weren't they all?), carefully dressed, of course, always all business, seldom smiling, never joking. Bank presidents did not joke about anything in those days, not with someone of my station, anyway. I would stand at the gate until he looked up from what he was reading (or pretending to read) and signal to me with a simple nod of his head that I could now approach. He never nodded until I had stood there for a few minutes. Did he want to emphasize to me what a busy man he was as he perused important documents? I thought so. Sometimes he would have me wait for what seemed like fifteen minutes. I don't recall he ever had a customer with him; rather, he always seemed to be occupied with the papers on his desk. Eventually I would get the nod and enter the holy of holies, but the truth was that men like Henry Wallace could ruin my schedule and have Ray Fisher extremely nervous by the time I got him on the line.

I go into that bank today (not in the same building) when I am in Massachusetts and see Mr. Wallace's portrait on the wall and I want to tell people there that I actually knew the august Mr. Wallace—well, sort of. I believe he might have been the first president of the bank, but I am not sure of this. As a matter of fact, I currently have five-thousand in a passbook account at that bank. I wouldn't be surprised if I were the bank's only Kentucky customer. I opened the account when my sister Kathy was a manager there. I like to think Mr. Wallace would be pleased I bank at Pentucket today.

I don't recall Mr. Wallace changing the ad copy substantially. Some advertisers would relentlessly try to rewrite the copy they got from me, and it was kind of my job to gently discourage them from doing so. Sometimes though, they would not take no for an answer, and so I dutifully made the changes and called them in to Ray. He would say to me, "May be tight getting these changes done," but usually it happened, and the changes were made. Thankfully, there were not too many advertisers who wished to make drastic rewrites. Jerry Fishbine at Hudson's Women's Apparel would try sometimes, but I was good at discouraging him.

Sometimes I would have to go to a place called Truly Yours, which sold bras primarily, and had a huge bra on a model in the window. I never quite understood why it stayed in the window so long. It was almost grotesque. The woman proprietor was kind of standoffish with me, as if she did not approve of males entering the premises. I don't think too many men did go in.

Then there was Mitchell's, as I mentioned, and Parks Snowe's, another department store next to Mitchell's. Mitchell's had a fine book department in the basement, and I liked to go there and browse if I got done with my proofs early (all corrections called in to Ray Fisher). Sometimes on my lunch break I would return to Mitchell's to look over the books.

All of this running around was done on foot, by the way. I never drove. I didn't have a car. The paper was located on a back street up behind some abandoned shoe shop buildings. Haverhill was once a major center for the manufacture of women's shoes. In 1960, there were still a few companies left, but the industry was tanking and today there are none, unless maybe a small specialized place or two.

I had to walk at a brisk pace to accomplish my job. It was a manageable task, and where I am as I write this account, a few days before my sixty-seventh birthday, I am still walking a lot, and walking briskly. The penchant for walking probably began with that office boy job almost fifty years ago. Who knows, the fact that I am still around and still healthy might be partly attributed to this habit formed so long ago.

Ray Fisher always looked to me like he could benefit from a bit of exercise. He was kind of pear shaped, with his ample steel-gray hair combed back on his scalp, and a big smile showing very even teeth which, I am sure, were not his. He was a nervous sort, especially when deadlines approached, as they did every day, and some of the salesmen did what they could to make Ray even more nervous. Everybody in that office seemed to smoke except for Ray Fisher and me—the two Rays. Ray not only didn't smoke, I don't think he drank coffee, either. He was a Republican through and through, and he was not enthralled with our then new President, John F. Kennedy. I am sure Ray thought Kennedy too young and too liberal, but he sort of tolerated him and didn't say much at all until Alan Shepherd, the first U.S. man in space, was at the White House to get a medal, an award for his accomplishment from President Kennedy.

Kennedy, new at this stuff I suppose, simply handed the medal to the astronaut instead of pinning it on him until his wife, Jackie, who was standing nearby, stepped in and did the job—or maybe she told the President in a whisper that he ought not to merely hand the medal to the man. It was a small gaffe, easily overlooked, but not for Ray Fisher. He thought it a thoroughly unconscionable thing to do. It didn't help either that Alan Shepherd was from Derry, N.H., where Ray lived. And furthermore, Ray knew the family well, as well as the astronaut himself. I don't think Ray ever forgave Kennedy for that mistake. I heard him talk about it often during the time I was there. I was gone, however, by the time of the assassination.

I remember another salesman by the name of Bill Fanaras. He was one who enjoyed thoroughly rattling Ray Fisher. He was not malicious, it was just good fun for him. Bill was older than he looked, probably about thirty-five, and he was swarthy. I can't recall if he was married. He was a great teaser, and he'd tease me as well, but I don't now remember what about. What I do remember well was that Fanaras was a record collector, a jazz fan and had an extensive collection of Dinah Washington recordings. He knew all about her, too.

I lived about ten miles from the newspaper offices and caught a ride each day with Red Ramsdell, who lived just up the street from our house. He picked me up each day and took me home and would take no money for his trouble. He was a very quiet, soft-spoken redhead. Not awfully assertive for a salesman—no line of bull—but he seemed to get along just fine. He handled car ads mostly, display ads, which leads me to his observation that there were a lot of salesmen at the *Journal*, and I suspect not everyone earned his keep. Yet I never saw anyone fired or laid off—no downsizing. I don't know how so many came to be hired in the first place—there must have been ten or twelve salesmen at that small daily paper. It seems an enormous number as I think back on it now. I guess it says more about the paradox of William Loeb. He was just an easy man, not hard to please, and probably easy to fool. At the same time, these were nice people to know so early in my working life, all of them. Maybe even Hank Price, too. Certainly I include Loeb as well. Just about everybody is dead by now, I am quite sure (one hopes not Bob Houle).

The paper even had an artist, full time, mind you. He did illustrations for sports, nothing political, or rarely so. His name was Bob Murphy. He had a cubbyhole in the hall that led to the circulation department in the back. He too was very friendly to everyone, easy to be around. Kind of a quiet guy but always with a big grin on his face. I used to ask him why he didn't do political cartoons and he said he just didn't care to. Wasn't asked to either, he said. I doubt if he would have liked Loeb's right-wing views anyway. A lot of the staff didn't. But Mr. Loeb was well thought of just the same. I heard his name a lot in the years after I left the *Journal*, and the comments were not always friendly, but I just don't remember him as a hard man except maybe in what he wrote and often published on the front pages of his newspapers. It was bold I suppose to publish his editorial opinions on page one, but he owned the newspaper and paid the bills, so that was his prerogative I figured.

Beyond where Bob Murphy sat was the domain of Ty Abate, the director of circulation. In my entire life, only once has my name been second when a list was drawn up alphabetically. Abate of course always came ahead of Abbott. At Christmas time the newspaper ran an ad wishing readers Merry Christmas and then listed all employees alphabetically, and of course I was second on that list, second to Ty Abate.

Abate had an impossible job of course, as the newspaper was a losing proposition, and nowhere was it losing more than in circulation. But he like everybody else was good natured. Stocky and about fifty with thinning hair, he was never too busy to take a moment to talk to me. I didn't like to go to Circulation because the women there would tease me about a young woman my age who worked there whom they would try to match me up with. I still had considerable adolescent acne on my face, which distressed me sorely. No remedy seemed to help, and only time and age would improve the situation. So as a result I was shy, and felt inferior and uncomfortable around women my age. And when I was in Circulation I was easily embarrassed and was sure my acne looked even redder in those moments, and so I avoided going in there as much as possible. The worst comment ever said to me in reference to my facial eruptions was that my face looked like it was having a period.

Yet part of my job was doing errands for Circulation each week. My primary chore was to go to the main post office to collect an envelope carefully sealed and embossed with a red wax seal to prevent tampering. Inside was the weekly puzzle solution. The newspaper every week would increase the prize by twenty-five dollars until the amount reached twenty-five hundred. But nobody ever seemed to win. I got to pick up the answer, which arrived by post each week from New York via registered mail. I would then dutifully take the envelope to the circulation manager, Mr. Abate.

I wondered why nobody ever seemed to win, but it was years later that I was to learn the envelope had several answers, maybe six or more, and if there were winners entered in the puzzle contest, officials would choose a non-winning solution. Now it seems to me there could have been an entry for each solution, but the *Journal* did not have a particularly literate readership so that did not happen, and so far as I know, nobody ever won the prize, and the paper closed down without a winner.

That clearly was cheating, and had I known it at the time I was involved, I might have called foul. Hell, I am nearly 67 now and lost my job as a social worker recently revealing fraud in the system where I was employed, and got fired for speaking out. I have to believe I would have been no less vigilant fifty years ago when I was eighteen. Maybe yes, maybe no. I needed the job at that time. I didn't need the job at the age of sixty-seven. Nevertheless, the deal was very unfair of course—illegal too, I suppose.

I wonder sometimes how many people knew of that fraud. Did the general manager Becker know? Surely he must have. And Ty Abate had to know. Did Loeb himself know? I guess it was pretty petty compared to what we see today with billions routinely being stolen by so-called respectable people. I like to believe persons like Ray Fisher and on down the line never had an inkling of the puzzle fraud. Maybe there were some who were suspicious but kept quiet.

Finally, it came time for me to leave the *Journal*. I was a little sad to go. I had worked my way up to perhaps \$55 a week. Another person, the young salesman Bob Houle was leaving, too. Both of us were going to college. Bob had been accepted by the University of New Hampshire to study just what I am unsure. While Bob was always friendly to me—he was to everyone—and closer to my age than any of the others, he nevertheless kept his distance. I was after all a mere office boy and he was a salesman and earned a lot more money than I did.

Bob was going to the state university in Durham, New Hampshire, a prestigious place in those years, and maybe today, too, and I was headed across the Merrimack River, perhaps three miles away, to the new community college opening that fall. It wasn't hard to get into the college, a warm body just might make it, but to get to go to the University of New Hampshire, that was an accomplishment of the first order. To my mind, at least.

In order to properly say good-bye to Bob, the other salesmen planned a dinner in his honor at the Butcher Boy Restaurant in North Andover, which is nearby. It was a fine steakhouse and is no longer there, but there is still a Butcher Boy Meat Store. I believe it is across the street from where the restaurant once was.

As the advertising office boy, I was invited of course, as were many others in the office. Of course, Bob knew everyone in the building, as did I, and had been there for several years. Gene Richards seemed to be in charge of the planning for the evening. I was surprised when I got to the Butcher Boy, as to just how many people were actually there. The place was jammed. The function room was full and overflowing. And if I live a lot more years, I don't think I will ever quite forget that evening.

As I have said already, most of these salesmen were gabby boys, talk being their business, so to speak. Few were heavily schooled, but some could be described as articulate. I guess that just comes with selling advertising, maybe especially on dying newspapers. Nobody had more skills in this way, nobody was more eloquent or had more stage presence than Gene Richards. He was emcee, and he was clearly ready for this night, fueled, as were the others, no doubt, with ample spirits. His timing was excellent. I have often thought that he could hold his own with any good comedian. I

don't know this for sure, but I suspect several of the other salesmen had a part in the planning of the speech Richards gave that night. I spotted Bob Houle, the honoree, when I came in and he was friendlier with me than he ever had been before, putting his arm around me in a fatherly fashion—something my own father never did. I could smell the alcohol on him and he seemed a little tipsy, but certainly in control and on his feet. Everybody was.

Richards began by laying out Bob's accomplishments his strengths, his dependability, his cheerfulness—in other words, his overall good work at the *Journal*. And he did good work. I sat there quite impressed with Richards' presentation. It was awfully good. He had no notes; he spoke off-the-cuff. He might have made a good politician, being able to think on his feet like that. But I knew he would never run for office, for there was not a political bone in his body, or maybe in any of the other men's bodies.

There was a quietness in the hall, a sense of anticipation with the audience as Richards went on, extolling Bob's virtues, but not mentioning him by name, although I didn't notice this at the time. It was only later when I recalled the evening I remembered that odd fact. Houle, meanwhile, was getting impatient, and maybe this was so because he was a little drunk. Perhaps what happened next might not have happened at all if Bob had not been drinking. But I suspect Richards knew his victim well and counted on Houle's response.

For soon Bob was on his feet declaring that enough had been said about him and that everyone there knew how great he was. "Give me my award!" he shouted at last, but Richards just kept talking, ignoring the young man. Houle then stood up and demanded Richards end this embarrassing presentation and hand over his envelope, which he fully expected to contain a generous amount of bills. When Richards had Houle just where he wanted him—and it was a cruel thing he was doing—he looked at Bob and said, "Sit down, I am not talking about you, I am speaking of Ray Abbott!" And he then invited me to come up and receive a card (containing money), all of this to thunderous applause.

I was completely blind-sided. The evening was slated to honor Bob Houle, not me, or so I thought. Obviously, I was wrong. How such a secret was kept among so many employees, I can only wonder. Ah, but poor Bob was tremendously taken aback by all of this, and no doubt quickly sobered up. Richards was especially savoring the moment, it was clear to see. This was the kind of practical joke they reveled in, these newspapermen; it was their kind of spoof, no mistaking it. And Houle went for it in a large way, to his utter humiliation.

In a way I was pleased that all of this was as much for me as it was for Bob Houle, but I felt empathy for him, as well. Others must have too, though nobody admitted it to me then or later.

I ran into Bob Houle some years later in a pub in Newburyport, Massachusetts, which is near Haverhill, and he immediately recalled that special evening in North Andover. He didn't think ill of Gene Richards—at least he didn't say he did. I think Richards may have been dead by this time. Still, Bob seemed to me not completely at peace about that long-ago event. It turned out that Bob had not graduated from the University of New Hampshire. By this time I had gone on to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where I graduated, and was now working as a social worker, what I have done for most of my career.

Bob seemed a little heavier and a bit gray, and his face told me he was drinking

probably more than was good for him. A lot of the confidence and cockiness of his early years seemed nowhere in evidence. I am not suggesting the events that evening played any substantial role in how his life turned out. I am not saying that at all, though sometimes I think the events in North Andover became some kind of a drag on him. But for all I know, he might have gone on to some high-powered position in business or in a large ad agency in New York. Who knows? But that humiliating moment at the Butcher Boy has stayed with him. There is no mistaking that fact. And it has clearly stayed with me for my entire life, or I wouldn't speak of it now, fifty years later.

As I've said already, I know that Richards died fairly young and most of the persons I wrote about here are gone. I hope Houle is not among them, because he would not be much older than me. The others, well, it is just not a good bet that they are still around after so many years. I know when the *Journal* failed, many of the staff moved up to Manchester and the *Union Leader*. Loeb took many in, kept them employed. I once exchanged a letter or two with Loeb's widow. While his newspaper, the *Union Leader*, was in Manchester, N.H., he lived in Prides Crossing, Massachusetts. I knew this because I was frequently given letters as an office boy to mail to Mr. Loeb containing reports of one sort or another. So I took a chance some years ago and wrote to Prides Crossing and I got a reply from someone in his family. She told me that Dick Becker was then still employed at the *Union Leader* in Manchester—she didn't say doing what—and he was close to retiring. That exchange of letters had to have been fifteen years ago, maybe twenty, so who can tell where Becker is, or even if he is alive? He, like the others, had a lot of bad habits too, so the odds can't be too great in his favor, although I wish him and all that bunch at the *Journal* only good things, including long lives if that's what they value, and I suppose most everyone does, long and healthy lives.