

WHERE YOU FROM? I'M FROM THE FAR EAST, BOY

Chapter 1 The Great Years of My Childhood

My name is Jack Tobin. I was born July 11th, 1931 in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Obviously I had no inkling the day I came down the birth canal that I was carrying a gene that years later was going to give me a rough time. I'm from a family of eight, four boys, four girls, and very loving parents, who were very fair and decent to us kids when we were growing up. There was a lot of love in the family, which I appreciated very much. I grew up in one of the most fascinating times of anyone's life. You often read about Jack London, Scott Fitzgerald in the Bay area of San Francisco. We had that and double that where I came from. I lived up from the railway station and the docks were just beyond where I lived. It was a fascinating place for a young person like me because I liked the adventure and the sea. A lot of our people on Main Street were in the merchant navy, so when I saw boats coming in I always thought of them somewhere in the world.

The people from Main Street were fascinating people themselves, individually. We had boat builders, pipe fitters...next door neighbours were tradesmen of all kinds, good tradesmen. Even the girls could do things that a lot of people couldn't. It was a real tradesman's home there, the next door neighbours and other homes down the street. One guy was in the merchant navy, and another got torpedoed a couple times during the war. Others were in the Royal Air Force and many were in the Royal Navy. There were two Newfoundland regiments, 59th & 166th, heavy and light artillery. The 166th Light Artillery Regiment was in the North Africa Campaign under General Montgomery, and the 59th Heavy Artillery Regiment was in Europe. Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders are steeped in history.

Newfoundland at the time was under commission of government ruled by England. We didn't take over Canada until 1949. There wasn't a shot fired or a man lost, for we Newfoundlanders are very peaceful, loving people. Also down from Main Street was a big pulp and paper mill. It was one of the biggest integrated pulp and paper machine mills in the world.

Getting back to my earlier years...I call myself Jack but my baptismal name was John, the same as my father. Everybody called him Jack as well. What happened was, according to my Mom, I was supposed to be called PJ, after my grandfather Patrick Griffin. Jack Casey was my godfather and the morning of my christening they had a few beers, or Jack did, and by the time I got out of the church they had my name switched to John after my father. So even at my baptism, there was a little booze involved. I don't know who to blame there but that's the way it was, they called me John Patrick instead of Patrick John. Anyway that was the start of it.

My grandfather used to come in to Corner Brook after school was out. He was from the East Coast and born at Bacon Cove, Conception Bay. He taught school on the Great Northern Peninsula East, at Conche, when he was sixteen years old. PJ (as my grandfather was called) was also a schoolteacher there at Bacon Cove, a school principal at Conception Harbour, and a justice of the peace. So he had a lot of authority at that time. He was also a horticulturist, and pretty good at it. He used to sell a lot of commercial plants, especially for driveways, school yards, churches and streets, around Corner Brook. Mom and her three sisters used to have to walk over the Barrens to Conception Harbour from Bacon Cove to go to school at the Sisters of Mercy there, which was a girls school. They had to walk four miles, so it was quite a long hike, but I never heard them ever complain about it.

In the early days my grandfather used to bend the elbow and he'd end up at a place down by the railway station where there was a bootlegger called Aunt Kates, run by a bunch of women. He liked to go down there and booze up and they'd love the

stories he'd tell. He'd spend a couple days down there on the booze and my Dad would have to go down and get him out of there. In all the time I was growing up, I never knew my father to go to a pub or drink outside of the house. My mother would buy the wine, a couple bottles of whiskey or rum, whatever she needed at Christmas time as far as the liquor was concerned, my father never even brought it. In the fall he made home brew. He had one of those ten gallon acid jars from the chemical lab at the Bowater Mill, where he worked at the time. When he first came to Corner Brook he was a traffic manager and dispatcher at the railway station with Tom Pumphrey. He was the station agent down there below us on Main Street. But then he went to work at the mill in the traffic division with Bowaters. He used to make the best brew beer I ever tasted in all my life. Even today, after I've been dry for a long time, I still get thirsty when I think about it

On the weekends, my father, of course, would be helping Mom out. When we were young he would root the ashes out of the furnace downstairs in the winter time...we had about 10 tons of coal put into the cellar in the fall and he'd stock up the old furnace. We had a wood and coal stove in the kitchen, that's where Mom did all her baking. She was one of the most perfect cooks I ever came across in all my life. She could make anything out of nothing, almost. She was a real top class cook. A pinch of this, a pinch of that. She never measured anything but everything turned out beautiful. She was the best. Even when we grew up in the depression... they call it the depression on the main land, but where I came from in Newfoundland, they call it normal times. She knew this depression was coming. She was well read, well educated, she read the papers and listened to the radios, knew something was coming, so she stocked up on bags of flour and a lot of other bulk foods, enough to last a couple of years. My father was working at Bowaters then, making around 33 cents an hour, working two and three days a week I think it was. So things were a little tight but you'd never know it in our family.

Mom could do anything with a Singer sewing machine. You could hear the treddle going at 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning.

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Eventually, when things got better in the '40's she got an electric one, where she could hit a lever with the side of her knee and it would go automatically. That's the way it was in those days, but we held together pretty good because Mom and Dad were good providers, did the best they could in providing for the eight of us. There were times around Christmas that my Mom didn't have enough money to buy stamps (and stamps were only a couple of cents each in those days) to send off a card or a letter or anything like that. Bowaters didn't give money at that time, but they would give stamps of different denominations and we'd live out of the company store and with the bulk food we had.

When my father went downstairs to do the chores, shake the furnace down and to take the ashes outside, (in the fall of the year of course, because we didn't have ashes in the summer time) he'd spend a bit of time down there. His beer was down there. He had those quart bottles with rubber screw stoppers that turned down on the top. If you were up in the kitchen and he'd open up a beer, you could hear the pop upstairs. The "smoke" would come out of it...it was a beautiful sight to see. My father would use those tall glasses and he'd fill a glass up and he'd work around the furnace, sweep the floor and the coal dust from the coal bin. He'd drink his glass of beer and then he'd put the stopper down on the bottle, it was a big quart, still two thirds of a bottle left, and he'd turn his glass over and put it on top of the bottle. He would bring up his ashes. As soon as I saw him clear the kitchen, I'd go down, pull the cap off the bottle and I'd fill the glass half full and I'd down that. Oh, I'm telling you, it was the best beer I ever tasted! All my life I'd look for the feeling I'd get from that and I never did find it. He never questioned me about it, never in his life, I don't know if he knew I was taking a few beers or not. Either he didn't know or he'd just let it go. I don't know to this day. That's the way it was.

Then I became an altar boy. I was the oldest of the boys in our family...there were four of us. At that time Kevin wasn't born, Jerry was next to me. My sister was the oldest, Marie, a couple years older than I. Jerry was about the same, two years younger than I, and then Tom was a year and a half younger than Jerry or

something like that. We had to walk in for the 7 o'clock mass before breakfast, down Main Street, and up West Street into St. Henry's Church in town. They had the church in the basement and the school was on top, the Catholic school. I had the combination to the safe and I'd open the safe and get the wine and chalice out for the priest. The priest would come in about five minutes to 7 a.m., then we would proceed to the altar. Before the priest came, I'd send Jerry out to light the candles on the altar because I wanted to have a shot of wine. They had the most beautiful wine I ever tasted in all my life. I have never tasted the same since, something like the beer. To this day I don't know what I started on first, I don't know if I started on beer or wine, but it doesn't make any difference. They had beautiful wine. The reason I sent Jerry out to light the candles was because I couldn't let him see me take a drink of wine, he'd most likely tell my Mom and then all hell would break loose when I got home. So that was the reason he went out there. This is not an excuse of why I had a drink of wine, but you must remember I'm from Newfoundland and the winter time down there with the wind blowing in from the North Atlantic right in the bay, it was very cold. So I'd have a shot of that because it gave me a nice feeling, as well as warm me up. I guess Jerry was about eight years old at the time. I was going on ten.

Around that time, just two doors down from us; there lived a gentleman by the name of Redmond Power. Our next door neighbour, Mrs Marks, he was her brother. He had a niece there, Alice was her name, she was about fourteen years old. Walter Marks, he was the youngest one of the Marks family next door to me, he was a year younger than I was, we were buddies to a point. He didn't go everywhere I went, I don't think there were too many people would follow me, even in those days. I guess the old man bought a pair of shoes for Alice. Every time I think of Alice, I think of the book "*Tobacco Road*". I don't know if any of you people read it or not but it was kind of a hillbilly type of book. Alice was a free spirit like myself and usually in the summertime she was in bare feet going all over the place. The old man, it must have been getting near school time, in the fall of the year in September, anyway, he ordered a pair of shoes for Alice. There

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was a box delivered from the company store. Alice came home and opened the box, put her shoes on and left. Walter and I came into the house, saw the box, paper, twine and bill on the floor and figured out what had happened. So Walter and I took the box up into the barn at the back and we shit in it, brought it back down, put the cover down, put the paper back on and the twine and wrapped the bill around the twine and a few days later, my mother calls me over into the house and says, "What did you do over at Uncle Redmonds the other day?" She mentioned what happened over there, and I said, I told her what we did, we went up and crapped in the box. She said, "They're not blaming it on Walter, they're blaming it on you." And ever since that time the old man, until the day he died, he called me Shitty. I was home this past year, in '99, and I was over at Walter's home, and his son was there, his son is an engineer now at the Corner Brook Paper Mill, and I was telling him the story about that time, and Walter told me what happened when we left there. He said Uncle Redmond came home just shortly after we did this job and opened the box and the steam rolls up there and he was pretty mad. But Walter told his mother that I did most of it. So I got the blame for it anyway.

It is my recollection when I was growing up on Main Street that everybody there worked, everybody. Some were tradesmen, as I mentioned before, two or three were foremen in the mill, different capacities. Some were guides on the river, where the Americans used to come in those days, salmon fishing, and boat builders. If they didn't work for Bowaters, or fished, they worked on their own. It was a very bustling time. The ones who worked but didn't get paid for it, I guess, were younger people. They had to chop wood, make sure there was lots of firewood stacked up for the Winter and so forth, everybody did something.

Down on the end of Main Street, across from the court house, today there's a building supplies company, I think it's Dawes Building Supplies, it used to be the old arena. People on Main Street ran the arena, different guys over the years. We had no artificial ice in those days. It had three big double doors on each side that would open up when we flooded the ice so it could

freeze. Bowaters owned the building and I guess the building was about 600 feet long, rounded off, straight up for about ten feet and then rounded off on the top and the offices were out front, the concessions and stuff like that, and the dressing rooms for the boys and the girls, on each side of the building. All us boys from Main Street were the rink rats there. We used to do all kinds of jobs, cleaning up and sweeping up, flooding the ice, putting in lines and so forth. They had a very high intensity hockey played there between the Protestants and the Catholics, the different schools in those days. Then we had the Commercial League, the Town Aces, the Humber Hawks, the Westsyde Monarchs and Curling Rangers hockey teams and we played with those guys, so it was a great time to be alive .

Then about 1939 a priest by the name of Father Joe came to Corner Brook, he was an American, he just got out of Italy after Mussolini kissed Hitler's ass there in 1939, he just got out before they closed the ports. He worked his way over on an old tramp and landed in the port of Corner Brook, so the bishop in Corner Brook grabbed him and he spent a few years there, the early part of the war, helping out. He used to put on bingo's and other games of chance in the fall of the year. I don't know where in the hell he got them, but he had two hundred geese, they were between ten and fifteen pounds each, live geese. And in the old parish hall in town, (of course the Catholics invented bingo as everyone knows) they used to have bingo there, at that time I would be eight or nine years old. They would sell the cards after each game, all the cards were ten cents each. Once, my mother had given me thirty cents so I bought the first card and I didn't win anything, it was just one line bingo, one way up or down or across or corner to corner. Whoever got the bingo got a goose. I didn't win on the first card, so before he came around to pick up the card (he used to pick them up after each game and resell them again), before he came back I took the card and shoved it inside of my shirt and I felt awful guilty, really, really guilty about this. Anyway he passed me and I put my card down and I'm starting to play the numbers, putting the beans on the N, I think I needed N42 and I said to God, "God please don't let them call this number." But sure enough N42 came up and I didn't say

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anything. But the guy next to me, he saw I had the full line on N, he held up my hand, he said, "Hey, this young kid got bingo here!" And sure enough and I went home that evening with a gunny sack with a goddamn live goose in that thing. It took all the strength I had to get it down West Street and over to Main Street. I really felt guilty about this. It wasn't until years later, I think it was 1979, I came home (I might be getting a little ahead of myself, but I went to the mainland for work in '64, I didn't get home again until '79. I had a bit of a rough life, I'll explain later but I was sober when I got home and that's the only reason I got there at that time). I said, "Mom," (my father was dead in the meantime), "Mom, I have something to tell you it's been bothering me for many years." She said, "It wouldn't have anything to do with the goose, would it, Jack?" She knew all the time, you know. She'd never said anything. She waited all this time so I could confess to it. I felt a bit of relief but it was amusing then. So that was father Joe and his geese back in '39.

In the wintertime when I was a younger guy, I used to spend most of my time at the rink. As I got older I'd to go out on the bay in the night time, if there was no wind on a full moon, with my girlfriend and we could skate for miles and miles, just beautiful. Back at the rink we'd play broomball and we'd have the girls on defence and in goal after we flooded the ice and it was dry, we had the double doors open and had a nice sheet on there. We'd put one girl in the goal and two on defence. We used to take the forward line, the boys did, and we'd play there. Old man Brown, who was crippled, was a night watchmen for Bowaters. He used to come in, if the girls were late getting home at night, he'd come in through the double doors, and four or five women were behind him looking for their daughters. It was a sight to behold! Those were the glory days for me.

Main Street in those days was a tough street but we all stuck together. We had trouble when people came down from Humbermouth and other areas and challenged us on the street. For some reason I got picked to do the defending, most of the time. Many times I came home with bruises or cuts from fighting my way out of a situation with those guys. I never looked for it,

believe it or not, but I didn't run away from it either. That's the way it was. People were very close, we looked after each other.

The Bay of Islands in winter, everything was frozen solid, and we had horse races. People came from across the bay to watch or take part in these. As there was no bridge across the bay, they came across by horse or dog team, or walked. If the ships got in early they'd make a bridge, a wooden bridge so the horses could come over the channel in order to get across to the other side, until the Ballam Bridge was built, up where the Humber River is at its narrowest, in the early '50's. So it was a very great time to be on the bay or near the bay.

I was the odd ball in the family. I'd say this, my mother wouldn't but I never asked her the question. I remember the first day at school. My sister, who was two years older, took me into the school and I shit my pants, Shit ran down my legs, must have been a hell of a mess. So she took me out the back way, out West Street, and got me home on Main Street where I lived, cleaned me up and took me back again. I was a free spirit, curious, just a little different from the others.

I mentioned about horse racing and sail boat racing on the ice, also, when we kids would come from school we'd grab our hockey stick and skates, run down just on the other side of Western Terminals there so we could get outside, on solid ice. Sometimes we'd have to shovel the snow off, other times the full bay would be pure ice with no snow on it, especially if we got a rain and a couple days of frost. Other days, when we'd shovel a bit of snow off, we would use our chisels, axes, hand axes, we had every kind of sharp instrument, to try to get a couple of feet of ice dug out, and when the tide came in it would flood the surrounding ice. It would freeze overnight and we'd come the next day and we'd have pure ice. That was a great time for playing hockey and skating. When we did have the whole bay full of ice, the sail boats were out and we would skate down the bay for miles. It was okay going with the wind but coming back was not so easy. By the time we got back in around 7 o'clock and got home up the hill where I lived, we were well bushed from the fresh air and school all day. We had a big supper, did our homework and got to bed pretty quick in those days.

It was war time and my father would come home at noon with the War Bulletin, which we got every day during the week, with reports about how our regiment was doing down in North Africa, Tobruk, etc., against Rommel, the German general there, so it was very interesting and reading about the naval battles in the north Atlantic, how much shipping got sunk, and how many of the German subs we sank, that type of news. We used to get a lot of traffic in the port of Corner Brook, a lot of the convoys were on the Scapflow run over to England, and the Murmanst run to Russia, the merchant navy ships. They would come in, of course you know battles are fought on paper as well, so they used to load up with pulp, sulfide and paper, It was an English mill, Bowaters, they used to supply their mills over in England with sulfide and paper. And of course they also shipped paper into the *States*, *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Enquirer*, etc. The Port of Corner Brook in those days had seamen from all over the world. It reminded me of The League of Nations. It was a very exciting time.

The convoys lay about 20 miles off South Head and the boats would have to go 20 miles out from port to get to South Head. After they got outside of South Head, sometimes the German subs would be waiting for them and knock them out of the water before they got to the convoy.

In 1943, the *Kittysbrook* came in and our next door neighbour, George Marks, was 3rd engineer on it. He'd sailed for many years before this, it was no trouble to see him before the war, in the summer time, his shirt sleeves rolled up and carrying a little sea bag, going either to St. Johns, looking at the port home, or going to Montreal or Halifax, looking for a ship to sail out on. In the meantime, Walter a younger brother of George, the youngest of the family, and myself, they had the *Kittysbrook* docked down off Crow Gulch just off the main docks, because the port was full, she was tied up near a boom with her anchor out, we had to walk that boom out and when the wind hits the bay it gets a bit choppy, the booms, of course, were to hold the pulpwood in so it wouldn't scatter over the bay, we had to walk out there, just like walking a gang plank, about three feet wide, twenty to thirty feet long and big heavy timbers, like a platform, interlocking all up through there, all sections with large chains on the ends to hold them

together. When we finally got out to the *Kittysbrook* (she was an old rust bucket about 5000 tons, we had to climb up the Jacob's ladder to get up to the deck. It was a little scary for young kids our age. We got up and in contact with George and he said he was going to get time off because this was home port for him. I think we brought him in some cigarettes or something. Anyway we got off, and George got time off. Finally, when the ship went into port to load up for a run over to England, he got on a drunk and the ship loaded up and sailed out without him...they had to go...they couldn't find George.

On that trip, the *Kittysbrook* was torpedoed (1943) before she got to the convoy. The Germans were waiting for her outside Shellbourne, Nova Scotia, and knocked her out of the water. George wasn't long getting on another ship because even in those days, although there wasn't the same discipline as in the army and navy, the merchant marine still a certain amount of discipline of a deserter, if he didn't pick up another boat quickly. So he did get another boat. Mrs. Marks told her son Walter that George was sailing on the *Dodge* previous to this, from Scapa Flow in England. They broke down on the North Atlantic half way to New York. It took them thirty-one days to get to New York. She thought they'd been torpedoed. I guess maybe this was his lucky day.

I remember talking to Cowboy Joe, another sailor from Main Street. He was on the *Murmanst* run to Russia, was torpedoed once on the *Waterton* during the war and lived to tell about it. He used to live with his grandparents; he was telling me a few years back that he was in the seaport of Odessa, Russia, during the war. He was in this big rambling building and they were all drinking and boozing, smoke thick enough to cut with an axe and he saw a crowd of people and he thought he recognized someone, he saw this blond guy. He said, "My God, he looks familiar", and he went over and this person was George, who was on another boat. They had sailed all over the seas in those days and never met each other until the war years. They met over in Russia, in Odessa. It was a fascinating tale. Another man, Gus Cossitt (who also lived

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with his grandparents), sailed out of Corner Brook in the later part of the war. He told me he sailed with George to the seaport of Odessa, in Russia.

Just across the street where we lived on Main Street was the Station Road. There was a field in between, and on the other side of that there was a bank that went down to the extension of the Station Road, down below. On top they had built a Seaman's Institute, and when the guys would get knocked out of the water by German subs (if they got off the boat, got picked up), that's where they would come. Some would come in their jock straps, others with clothing on, sometimes they'd grab whatever they could when they were running on deck, to jump off the ship that was torpedoed. Some of them had musical instruments; they played juice [Jew's] harps, mandolins, guitars, you name it, fiddles, the place was a really lively time for me, war years down there, in Corner Brook, on the docks, it was just an exciting time and I loved every minute of every day.

We had a hotel on Main Street about 200 feet up, across Main Street, on the corner from where I lived, called, the Humber House. There were a lot of journeymen, paper makers used to stay there. I used to bring down their lunches at noon, down to the guard gate at Bowaters in those days. Year or so later a family came to town, they stayed there, the father ran Western Terminals, he was the wharf boss, and he had three kids, two boys, one girl. The middle boy was crippled with polio and he was in braces, the girl was my first love, that's the reason I mentioned this. So it was a good time for me, I often wonder what happened to the family, I know the family left there eventually. I went on with my life but I often wondered down through the years how she made out, she was a beautiful looking girl and nice in every way. I had a lot of respect for her. Of course we were only in our teens, early teens... so much for that one.

In '45, the war was just over, I went to work with my first cousin. I was 14 at the time, and we were still under England, of course, and with Commission of Government. I worked with the Department of Natural Resources out of St. John's. My first

cousin Ed Corcoran was boss, he was a timber cruiser, we used to timber cruise all over the East Coast, Bonavista Bay, Trinity Bay, Random Island, St. Mary's Bay, you name it, we were there. We did silviculture as well, around the Deep Bight area in Trinity Bay. We did the whole of Random Island, Deer Island, timber cruised. We used to find out how many cords were to the acre of wood and the different types, and the caliper, the age, it was quite an interesting job. I was the compass man. When we timber cruised, in the morning we took a course off the maps that Ed had laid out for us cruisers. My first cousin was the main party chief (that's how I got my job, by the way). I was a compass man so I'd take my course, say North 13 West or whatever it was, that's the way it would go. We had five parties out, 2 to each party is 10 men, a quarter of a mile apart on a compass line. There was a walking boss, assistant to Ed, a couple of roustabouts and a full time cook.

In the summertime we lived in silk tents, the dining room was a big cotton tent and in the fall we slept in cotton tents. They were heavier to pack. We had to portage a lot of it around; so we had canoes down in Trinity Bay and on the inland lakes; across from Random Island we had a cruiser from Clarenville, hired for the summer and fall, to pick us up. Sometimes on the mainland we had to tie into the tracks and the speeder would pick us up when our line tied in with the railway. When cruising we went three or four miles a day, slow work because every seven hundred feet we'd stop and take a tally, with a 49' radius, of the number of trees, their heights, caliper, ages. When we went back to St. John's in the fall, the cruiser who was coming behind me on the compass course was putting everything on his clipboard, contours of the land etc. The maps were made from this on the ground, with estimates of the cords of wood per acre of different species. I worked mostly with grownups and of course we partied heavy at times. The boys would follow the girls down the road in those small settlements, and behind the boys came their mothers, who were chasing us. It was a great time!

I spent three summers there, coming back in the fall of the

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year and going back to school. I remember skipping grade ten, but took grade eleven. I took six subjects and I had to pass in five. I took art as a kicker. The only subject I failed in was art. I passed in the other five so I graduated from grade eleven. That was as high as we could go in those days. I wanted to get out into the work force anyway.

My cousin, Ed Corcoran, he had a younger brother, Danny, who was my grandmother's sister's boy. He was a Newfoundland Ranger stationed at Harbour Deep on the eastside of the Great Northern Peninsula. In March '36, when he was twenty-one years old, he had to travel on snowshoes to Port Saunders, which is about seventy miles across the peninsula. He became lost. He'd left his rifle and his compass somewhere along the way. He wasn't found for a couple of weeks and by then his arms and legs were badly frost bitten and he died at the hospital in St. Anthony. I heard my cousin Ed talk about Danny many years ago at my home in Corner Brook. He mentioned that he had retraced Danny's journey across the country to Port Saunders a few years later. Ed was a professional woodsman. There is a book written about Danny by a former Newfoundland Forest Ranger, Earl B. Pilgram. The book, *Will Anyone Search for Danny?* was published in '88.

Ed had another brother, Bill Corcoran, who was in the 166th Newfoundland Regiment in North Africa and Italy during the Second World War. After the war he had a barbershop on Kings Road, St. John's. Ed introduced me to my cousin Bill in '46. A very interesting guy.

In my early teens I had a contract with the *Western Star*... it was a daily at the time and still is...to deliver newspapers for Main Street, all Humber Rd., up to Premier Drive. I had my two younger brothers taking the lower highway, it was easier on them, I had Humber Heights, which was a tough one. I never did make any money, they did okay, but I didn't have the heart to collect half the time. A lot of people couldn't afford to buy the paper, so that was a failed venture on my part. But I broke even, I guess, and I had the satisfaction of meeting a lot of people, which was

good for me. I didn't know at the time, but a few years later I was going to have problems with how they printed a situation at Bowaters I was involved in, with the union