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The Pulley, The Memoir of A Bronx Industry

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THE PULLEY, THE MEMOIR OF A BRONX INDUSTRY

Carl Halpern

with an Introduction by his son,

Joel M. Halpern

Just as neighborhoods provided a setting for the interaction of different religious and ethnic groups, so too did the place of employment. Successful neighborhoods have had a sense of community, of shared spirit, about them. The same was true for successful industrial enterprises.

My family lived in The Bronx during the 1930s, when I was a boy. The location of The Bronx County Historical Society has particular meaning for me, with my early recollections of living on Hull Avenue and of attending nursery school on the other side of the park, across from Mosholu Parkway, where we subsequently moved. My father socialized with many of the people who worked at "the place," and so I knew many of those men. I recall attending the first four grades at P.S. 80, near the Society, and my mother taught at P.S. 90, not far from where my father worked. We moved to Mount Vernon in 1938, but when I was in my early teens I commuted every Saturday to spend a day working at the plant in various odd jobs which helped me understand the nature of what went on there.

In keeping with common attitudes of the time, many of our close relatives also worked there. The plant physician was our family doctor and my father's good friend. Having kin at the factory was true for both workers and management. This was so much the case that they rarely advertised for new employees. As described in the following article the advertisement my father answered was the exception. Kinship ties were, of course, common for the workplace. Some companies such as the now defunct Studebaker Corporation used to advertise the integrity of their product by reference to the number of fathers and sons on the payroll.

I am split between my concerns as a social scientist and my view as a participant and the son of a participant in the world my father describes. His attitudes are in consonance with the values of capitalist enterprise, with stress on individual motivation and the striving for self advancement. They are also the views of a man who had a modest success (although in keeping with the ethos of American corporate life my father would be the

first to minimize his success). My father, however, always considered himself a worker. To do his job properly it was essential to maintain constant contact with and seek to understand the problems of the men and women on the production line. This required constant effort never to lose sight of the meaning of work for the people who did the job. These complex attitudes will be described in subsequent essays.

This first account, about the repair of a pulley, reflects the great enthusiasm and optimism with which Americans entered into industrial life. To deny this is to neglect an important essential of our life in The Bronx and elsewhere. The skeptical reader is assured that the pain of the depression is not absent from these accounts, nor will we neglect, in subsequent episodes, the ways in which the corporation eventually was destroyed.

Joel M. Halpern



Carl Halpern in 1923.

Courtesy of the author.

The advertisement in the Sunday *New York Times* of February 10, 1917, caught my eye and very much appealed to me. It read as follows: "Office boy wanted, willing to work hard, advancement." The name of the advertiser, Hauserman Metal Manufacturing Company, was familiar to me. The location was very accessible, a matter of a short walk from my home. What was especially appealing was that I would not have to travel to Manhattan and pay carfare. Also, I might go home for lunch, another saving.

I reread the advertisement many times. With each reading my excitement increased. Everything about it appealed to me. Of course, there were many questions in my mind. What do they expect of an office boy? What will the duties be? What kind of people are they? How large is the organization? What do they make there? How many people do they employ?

It was a very exciting day and I could not think about or do anything else. Little did I realize that day that this would be my future for a half century, my only work for a lifetime, that I would become part of a pioneer industry. In fact, at that time it was the only plant fully equipped and staffed for metal embossing and etching. The management had learned the various facets of this industry in Europe, where the industry had originated many years before.

I went to sleep very early that night, intending to get up early so that I would be the first one to apply for the position. The night passed quickly but with little sleep. At five o'clock on Monday morning I was up. My mother insisted on serving me a hot breakfast. Within fifteen minutes I was properly dressed and on my way out. The street was dark and the cold air invigorating. Falling snow added to my excitement. Since the distance was short I was in front of the plant in a few minutes. It was still dark and a short time before 6 a.m. I stood alone outside the plant office entrance.

The plant was located in the Morrisania area in the southern part of The Bronx. Across the street was the Sheffield Farms milk-processing plant. Nearby were two large bakeries. In the main, this was a residential area of private homes and small apartment houses. The factory was eight stories high, and the New York Central tracks were in the rear of the building. I waited just a short time when an elderly gentleman, who turned out to be the watchman, opened the door and asked if I was applying for the office boy job. When I told him that I was, he asked me to come inside since it was very early, cold and damp and much more comfortable inside. Of course, I was very happy to be allowed inside.

The room had only a few small lights. The watchman, Setrag Aggregian, turned on some other lights. I removed my overcoat. He asked a number of questions such as, "Do you live in The Bronx? Have you worked before? Do you realize that this is a very fine company?" He said that I would be very lucky if I got a job there. "They make such useful and wonderful things here," he said.

Then he started to tell me about himself. He was an Armenian. Like many of his countrymen who worked for this company, he had been there many years. Now he had gotten older and could not do

the physical work required. The managers were very nice and understanding and made sure that he had a job. They knew he was reliable, honest and an American citizen. He was proud of being an American. All of this was told to me without any question on his part as to whether I was trustworthy or not. It was just an expression of a decent person's feelings towards a young man who he saw was nervous and not too well acquainted with job hunting or the business world.

Setrag was dressed in overalls and a heavy sweater. Around his shoulder he had a clock on a strap. He explained that this clock contained a paper dial and that on each floor of the factory there were a number of stations. Each station contained a key which he inserted into the clock, which punched the location. The clock regulated the time. His supervisor checked each morning to be sure every part of the plant was covered on time. Then these records were available for insurance company inspectors to prove that the plant was under constant supervision all night long. It was also very important for him to be sure that all windows were closed so that there would be no spoilage of material or machinery in case of rain. He also had to check that all machinery was properly turned off along with all unnecessary lights. If there was anything wrong, he could report it to the maintenance department in the morning.

I looked out. Dawn was breaking and still no other people outside. Setrag offered me a cup of coffee, for which I was very thankful. He then continued to tell me about the factory. Most of the work consisted of etched metal nameplates, dials, scales, and novelties. There were also metal lithographed signs, scales and clock dials. At that time they meant nothing to me. Then he took me to the inspection department where he put on some of the lights so I could see the finished products. I looked at the work with great interest. Never before had I seen such large signs, so many beer trays, and many other items. The boxes were piled on tables awaiting inspection. The machinery that occupied the other area of the floor seemed huge and strange to me.

The lights were put out and we returned to the section of the plant where we were before. This was the vestibule and waiting room of the office. When I glanced outside, I noticed a line had formed. Setrag then took me into the main office and showed me the various offices of the company managers. He also showed me the office of the clerks and particularly pointed out the office of the gentleman who would be hiring the office boy. This was Mr. Gleason, the office manager.

By this time men had appeared, and I was told that this was the

maintenance crew. They arrived a half hour before factory starting time. They greeted Setrag. He told them about things that would have to be taken care of that day. In a short time other men and women appeared. They also greeted him cordially and told him bits of gossip about what had transpired in the factory the day before. Some spoke of their families. It seemed to me that this factory had employees that liked each other. Also a considerable number were Armenians like himself. As the employees arrived they would go over to one of the two large timeclocks and push the handle. The clock stamped the number assigned each employee. They also punched out before going home. The card was then used by the payroll department to calculate employee earnings. Most of the people were hourly employees.

The factory had an elevator, but it was used mostly for freight. After punching in, they walked up the stairs to their floors. They made certain to be at their benches or workplaces five minutes before the final bell, otherwise they would be considered late by their foreman. Either the night before or early in the morning the foreman would arrange their work to make certain that there was no loss of time.

There were a couple of stragglers. They punched in after the first bell and ran to their workplace by the time the final bell rang. The sudden hum of machinery was startling. Before I could do much thinking about it, a young man entered carrying a large canvas bag and many packages. I was told by Setrag that this bag contained the mail and packages that had been picked up at the post office. It was this young man who had been promoted to file clerk, making available the opening for the office boy job. Now that this would be my work if I got the job, I watched the young man open the lock on the bag and with a letter opener slit the envelopes and place them very neatly on Mr. Gleason's desk. He then gathered all the packages and distributed them to the various sections of the plant.

Others from the office staff started to arrive. Among the early arrivals was the telephone operator. The switchboard was located in the waiting room. The operator was a pretty young woman who also acted as receptionist. She immediately disconnected many plugs left the night before. Shortly I heard the telephone ring. I enjoyed watching her. I liked her pleasant voice. It seemed to me that the office became alive with her presence.

Soon Mr. Gleason arrived. Setrag, who normally would have left after the first bell, waited. He wanted to speak to Mr. Gleason and to recommend me for the position. He told Mr. Gleason he had confidence in me. A few moments later Setrag motioned for me to

come into Mr. Gleason's office. I was greeted by a gentleman who seemed very neat, wore glasses and was of medium height. He acted reserved. I was asked about previous employment, my age, name and where I lived. I told him I did not have any previous experience but that I felt I could do the job required to his entire satisfaction and that I would appreciate the chance to prove my worth. He smiled and said, "Well, Setrag thinks so, and I trust him. Make sure you work hard. Always be on time, and listen to instructions."

He then told Setrag, on his way out, to please tell the other young men on line that the position was filled. Mr. Gleason asked me to wait again outside until he could arrange to talk further with me when he was finished with his mail.

In about a half hour, the young man I saw earlier and whose name was Nat asked me to follow him into Mr. Gleason's office. He was waiting for me. I was given a more detailed description of what would be expected of me. Nat was told to spend some time with me and explain more of the details of the work. Mr. Gleason cautioned me that I would be observed to make sure I was the proper person for the job.

Nat proceeded to explain the various functions of the office boy job. He said that the mail and packages must be called for at the beginning of the work day and then again at 10 a.m. Mail from the post office had to be carried back in the locked canvas bag. I also had to deliver mail from the factory to the post office in the same locked bag, along with packages. This was repeated at noon, at 3 p.m. and finally once more at the end of the day. I also had to distribute throughout the plant the parcel post packages as well as notes, samples, blueprints and other items. I was to receive items from the supervisors for safekeeping in the office. There were also outside errands to attend to, bills to copy, and the need to keep an accurate record of postage stamps. The key for the stamp box, like the key for the mail bag, was kept in Mr. Gleason's office when not in use. (Of course, this keeping of postage stamps was a considerable time before postage meters.)

There were other incidental duties that I would be told about later. Nat thought we should start with the procedure for distribution of notes and other items to different parts of the factory. We walked up the eight floors to the top. All the while I was given incidental information by Nat. We started to hand out the notes. In each case, I was introduced to the supervisor with a short talk about his work. In turn we received items for the office. In many cases, I was asked to sign a receipt to be sure that the supervisor would not be blamed if the article could not be found when needed. I was very much

interested in what I saw and the people I met. This procedure, I realized, would have to be repeated many times until I was fully aware of the departments and their functions.

When we returned to the office I was told to go to the city for various errands. But before doing this I was to go to the post office with Nat for the ten o'clock mail. He introduced me to the postal clerks and gave a letter from Mr. Gleason to the post office superintendent authorizing me to pick up mail and packages. My trip to "The City" was to the company's attorneys and to their accounting firm. I also was to make a number of stops to pick up supplies needed by the factory. Again, I was cautioned not to lose any time. I did as I was told, and, although I had a considerable number of stops to make, I was back in the office in a matter of a few hours. Mr. Gleason was surprised when he saw me back in the office. He called me to his office and asked, "Did you take care of all the errands assigned to you?"

When I told him I did and also gave him the reports, letters and forms from both the lawyers and the bookkeeping firm and accounted for all of the factory material, he seemed very much relieved.

He said, "Well, I guess you did not waste any time."

Indeed I did not. In fact, I did not take time to have any lunch since I was anxious to make sure that I pleased him. Then I went to the post office to pick up the mail. When I returned from the post office, I proceeded with the copying of the invoices. This was done by placing the invoice, which had been printed in a special ink on special paper on a tissue sheet in a book. When a wet sponge was applied, some of the ink was transferred to the blank sheet in the book without affecting the invoice. In this way a record was kept in a binder in accordance with the date of the invoice. This did away with loose copies that might be misfiled or lost. I then took care of special notes for the factory. After this I proceeded with the final work of enclosing invoices in their proper envelopes, sealing all the mail, placing the proper postage, keeping a record of stamps used, and collecting all the packages for mail delivery. When I arrived at the post office it was past the regular hour and I had to enter in the back. I introduced myself to the night crew who already were alerted to the new office boy assigned by the company.

This was a very long, active and interesting day for me. I learned a great deal, met many people, and had so many instructions given to me that I decided to write down all that I could remember. This I continued to do each day so as to avoid the possibility of mistakes. When I got home, my parents waited until I had eaten. Then there was a period of questioning. I tried to explain every possible detail

with my limited knowledge. Truly, some of the explanations were not very clear to me. I realized that I would have to learn a lot more before I could make myself clear to others. I informed my parents that I was to receive \$4 per week. (About fifty years later the President of the company came into possession of a very old ledger, and at a Board of Directors meeting showed the record of my pay and of his own starting pay, which was not much higher.)

I forgot to ask about hours or to inquire about other details. This now seems very strange. My parents and I were pleased. I was tired and wanted to be at the plant early in the morning and see my friend Setrag and thank him for his efforts on my behalf. I also wanted to have time to perform my duties properly the next morning. I went to bed early and again arrived before the maintenance crew. Setrag now considered me his protégé. He told me that he would give me any information I might need. He was my friend. I did in fact check various matters with him and found it worthwhile. Setrag had a lot of common sense and honesty. This I was thankful for.

After preparing the mail for Mr. Gleason, I did my other job of distribution of notes, packages and other items and recording the details. When I returned to the office, Nat advised me that part of my duties was to get the lunches for the office staff. He told me where to go and also let me know I would get my own lunch free. I found that the lunchroom Nat used was very obliging. The place was clean. Without my asking, the owner told me that I would get my lunch free. He also suggested that if I were sent out for any other food I should see him and he "would make sure I was not sorry for giving him the extra business." When I returned to the office with the lunches, my errands were ready. This time I had my sandwich and milk.

Instead of my full lunch period I took only about ten minutes. Incidentally, I continued this practice so that I could return early enough after my errands and have sufficient time to perform my duties properly. The attitude of the people in the plant and office was contagious. I, too, became enthusiastic about my work and found that everyone in the office and the plant was anxious to cooperate with me so that our work would proceed more efficiently. Nat spent less time with me each day, and by the end of the week he was totally occupied with his new filing job. I was able to help him obtain files, blueprints and samples from previous work orders. This information was required by the order entry department in the office to enable them to process new orders. In doing this, I learned a great deal of the work involved in the manufacture of various products.

I continued to be involved with the rest of the office. There were secretaries, purchasing personnel, an engineering group, a quotation

department, and production and order-entry people, in addition to the executive offices, customer relations clerks and some salespeople. The accounting department occupied a separate area near the factory employees' entrance, close to where the time clocks were located. In this way, an employee could obtain any information about his pay or related matters.

This area was subdivided to include an office that then was occupied by the production superintendent. When necessary, he could discuss personnel problems and, if necessary, the employee's record. This record was in the accounting department and readily available. That office also held meetings concerning safety matters. The superintendent was always available. The company believed it was easier to settle small problems rather than allow them to grow into big matters. This again related to the feeling of cooperation that existed. There was also a first-aid room staffed by one of the female supervisors and available for treatment of minor injuries or illness.

By the end of the week, and that meant Saturday evening, I was alerted to something special transpiring, but I was busy with my duties. One of the office staff told me that a very important part of the overhead power system had broken. Since this could delay production on Monday, a conference was held in the Vice-President's office. Shortly before I was ready to leave with the mail and packages for the post office, Mr. Gleason called me into his office. He asked that I return as soon as possible.

I rushed back to the office as fast as I could and found Mr. Gleason waiting for me together with the maintenance supervisor and my friend Setrag. I was asked to take a large steel pulley to the lower part of Manhattan. It weighed much more than I could lift. But it could be rolled. This pulley was a special part of the power supply unit. It had a severe crack in the center and would not operate properly on the shaft. It was necessary to have the cracked section welded. The factory did not then have any welding equipment. The only shop willing to wait for me to bring it down was one located down on Cliff Street, near the Brooklyn Bridge. I was to wait for the repair to be completed and return the pulley to the factory. And then I was to telephone the Vice-President, Mr. Gleason and the maintenance supervisor when I got back to the plant.

It was late. Through a neighbor who had a phone, I contacted my parents and told them I would be home late because of a special errand. I said I would keep in touch with them. Then I started to roll and push the pulley several blocks to the Third Avenue Elevated station. I managed to get the wheel up the stairs to the station platform. After some explanation to the ticket taker, he allowed me to go through. But the conductor would not let me inside the car. I had

to remain outside with the pulley on the open-end car platform. It was cold and the wind was biting. I stayed out there with the wheel until the elevated reached the City Hall station. Actually, that was the last stop. Then I had to roll and push the pulley to the welding shop.

The welder was waiting and very anxious to get the job finished. Due to the fact that he found that he could not do all the welding at one go, it took a few hours to finish the job. During this time, I tried to review the workings of the shafting, pulleys and belting arrangement in the plant's machinery, supplied by a large steam engine in the basement. That engine supplied power and steam for the entire factory. I remember how I reacted when I first saw the power plant. It had a huge flywheel and a large, long piston. This always made me think of a locomotive. I was especially anxious to watch, when possible, the way the stationary engineer always checked the dials on the instruments. He kept the engine and the area in which it was located very clean. He would not tolerate visitors. He kept the man who shoveled coal into the boiler always on the go. Meanwhile he watched his instruments and especially the various tubes that indicated the water supply and the condition of the steam.

This means of power was used but a short time when a number of new machines driven by electric motors replaced the shafts and pulleys. Finally, the steam engine was replaced by oil burners. But, at this particular time the pulley system transmitted the power to most of the machines. A broken pulley meant that the affected section would be shut down.

After the repair was completed, I rolled the pulley back to the Third Avenue El and had to spend the entire trip back again on the platform. I was very glad to get to the station near the plant. When I rolled the pulley inside and Setrag saw me, he was overjoyed. He gave me a cup of coffee. Then I called all the people I was asked to get in touch with. They thanked me and Mr. Gleason told me he would have something to say to me Monday morning and that it would be good news. Then I called my parents. When I arrived home it was very late, and I was cold and hungry. After I told my folks all about my adventure I went to bed. Thinking over the events of the week, I found them very exciting.

What came to my mind many times that Sunday was what the good news Mr. Gleason had for me would be. During the day, I couldn't resist the urge to go to the factory and find out if all was well with the pulley and if it was reassembled and ready for production. I met the maintenance supervisor and his crew. They were about ready to go home, having finished the entire repair work and tested the various belts and other items to be sure all would be well for the

next morning's work. That was when I found out from the supervisor that they had had to ask me to take the pulley down to Cliff Street because the truckman was out making deliveries. Nat had refused to do the job, claiming he had a prior appointment. So they decided to take a chance with the new boy. However, all turned out well and everyone was happy.

Monday morning, I called for the mail and had a conversation with Setrag who, of course, felt he had a hand in having chosen me. He, too, seemed anxious to know what Mr. Gleason would have to tell me. I promised to give him full details the next morning. After taking care of the mail and packages, I went into the factory to do the distribution of notes and packages and take care of the various needs of the foremen. When I returned to the office it was rumored that Nat was discharged. I remembered that I was upset and sorry. I had gotten to like him and enjoyed working with him.

The fact was that Nat was not there at his filing job. I continued with my work, and after I returned with the 10 a.m. mail, Mr. Gleason called me into his office. He thanked me again for my efforts and then confirmed the fact that Nat was discharged because of his refusal to do what was asked of him. He said that they were not going to hire anyone else, as business was not too good, but that another young man would help me. He told me that, between this young man and myself we would be able to take care of our present duties and do the filing.

Then I was told my pay would be raised to \$4.50 per week. I thanked Mr. Gleason and assured him I would continue to do my best to satisfy him. I left Mr. Gleason's office quite excited but continued with my work and then left for the store to get lunches for the office staff. After having my lunch I left for the daily trip to "The City" for various planned errands.