

The Story of the Sun: New York, 1833-1918

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The Story of
The  Sun
THE  **SUN.**

NUMBER 1.]

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1833.

[PRICE ONE PENNY.]

THE FIRST HEAD-LINE OF THE NEW YORK SUN



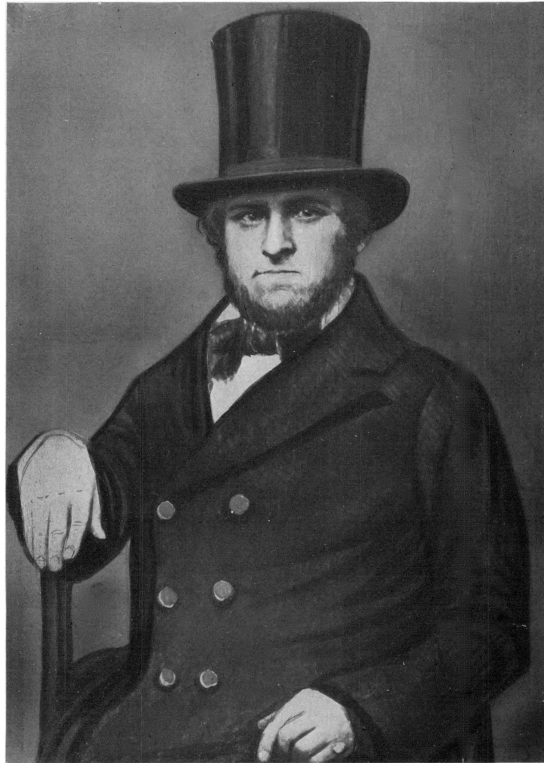
THE  **SUN.**

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THE SECOND HEAD-LINE OF THE NEW YORK SUN



BENJAMIN H. DAY, FOUNDER OF "THE SUN"

TO
FRANK A. MUNSEY

AN INTRODUCTION

BY THE EDITOR OF THE SUN

It is truer, perhaps, of a newspaper than of most other complex things in the world that the whole may be greater than the sum of all its parts. In any daily paper worth a moment's consideration the least fancifully inclined observer will discern an individuality apart from and in a degree independent of the dozens or hundreds or thousands of personal values entering at a given time into the composite of its grey pages.

This entity of the institution, as distinguished from the human beings actually engaged in carrying it on, this fact of the newspaper's possession of a separate countenance, a spirit or soul differentiating it from all others of its kind, is recognised either consciously or unconsciously by both the more or less unimportant workers who help to make it and by their silent partners who support it by buying and reading it. Its loyal friends and intelligent critics outside the establishment, the Old Subscriber and the Constant Reader, form the habit of attributing to the newspaper, as to an individual, qualities and powers beneficent or maleficent or merely foolish, according to their mood or digestion. They credit it with traits of character quite as distinct as belong to any man or woman of their acquaintance. They personify it, moreover, without much knowledge, if any, of the people directing and producing it; and, often and naturally, without any particular concern about who and what these people may be.

On their own side, the makers of the paper are accustomed to individualise it as vividly as a crew does the ship. They know better than anybody else not only how far each personal factor, each element of the composite, is modified and

influenced in its workings by the other personal factors associated in the production, but also the extent to which all the personal units are influenced and modified by something not listed in the office directory or visible upon the payroll; something that was there before they came and will be there after they go.

Of course, that which has given persistent idiosyncrasy to a newspaper like the *Sun*, for example, is accumulated tradition. That which has made the whole count for more than the sum total of its parts, in the *Sun*'s case as in the case of its esteemed contemporaries, is the heritage of method and expedient, the increment of standardised skill and localised imagination contributed through many years to the fund of the paper by the forgotten worker as well as by the remembered.

The manner of growth of the great newspaper's well-defined and continuous character, distinguishing it from all the rest of the offspring of the printing press, a development sometimes not radically affected by changes of personnel, of ownership, of exterior conditions and fashions set by the popular taste, is a subject over which journalistic metaphysics might easily exert itself to the verge of boredom. Fortunately there has been found a much better way to deal with the attractive theme.

The *Sun* is eighty-five years old as this book goes to press. In telling its intimate story, from the September Tuesday which saw the beginning of Mr. Day's intrepid and epochal experiment, throughout the days of the Beaches, of Dana, of Laffan, and of Reick to the time of Mr. Munsey's purchase of the property in the summer of 1916, Mr. O'Brien has done what has never been undertaken before, so far as is known to the writer of this introduction, for any newspaper with a career of considerable span.

There have been general histories of Journalism, presenting casually the main facts of evolution and progress in the special instance. There have been satisfactory narratives of journalistic episodes, reasonably accurate accounts of certain aspects or dynastic periods of newspaper experience, excellent portrait

biographies or autobiographies of journalists of genius and high achievement, with the eminent man usually in strong light in the foreground and his newspaper seldom nearer than the middle distance. But here, probably for the first time in literature of this sort, we have a real biography of a newspaper itself, covering the whole range of its existence, exhibiting every function of its organism, illustrating every quality that has been conspicuous in the successive stages of its growth. The *Sun* is the hero of Mr. O'Brien's "Story of the *Sun*." The human participants figure in their incidental relation to the main thread of its life and activities. They do their parts, big or little, as they pass in interesting procession. When they have done their parts they disappear, as in real life, and the story goes on, just as the *Sun* has gone on, without them except as they may have left their personal impress on the newspaper's structure or its superficial decoration.

During no small part of its four score and five years of intelligent interest in the world's thoughts and doings it has been the *Sun*'s fortune to be regarded as in a somewhat exceptional sense the newspaper man's newspaper. If in truth it has merited in any degree this peculiar distinction in the eyes of its professional brethren it must have been by reason of originality of initiative and soundness of method; perhaps by a chronic indifference to those ancient conventions of news importance or of editorial phraseology which, when systematically observed, are apt to result in a pale, dull, or even stupid uniformity of product. Mr. Dana wrote more than half a century ago to one of his associates, "Your articles have stirred up the animals, which you as well as I recognise as one of the great ends of life." Sometimes he borrowed Titania's wand; sometimes he used a red hot poker. Not only in that great editor's time but also in the time of his predecessors and successors the *Sun* has held it to be a duty and a joy to assist to the best of its ability in the discouragement of anything like lethargy in the menagerie. Perhaps, again, that was one of the things that helped to make it the newspaper man's newspaper.

However this may be, it seems certain that to the students of the theory and practice of journalism, now happily so numerous in the land, the chronicler of one

highly individual newspaper's deeds and ways is affording an object lesson of practical value, a textbook of technical usefulness, as well as a store of authoritative history, entertaining anecdote, and suggestive professional information. And a much wider audience than is made up of newspaper workers present or to come will find that the story of a newspaper which Mr. O'Brien has told with wit and knowledge in the pages that follow becomes naturally and inevitably a swift and charming picture of the town in which that newspaper is published throughout the period of its service to that town—the most interesting period in the existence of the most interesting city of the world.

It is a fine thing for the *Sun*, by all who have worked for it in its own spirit beloved, I believe, like a creature of flesh and blood and living intelligence and human virtues and failings, that through Mr. Munsey's wish it should have found in a son of its own schooling a biographer and interpreter so sympathetically responsive to its best traditions.

EDWARD P. MITCHELL.

THE STORY OF “THE SUN”

CHAPTER I

SUNRISE AT 222 WILLIAM STREET

Benjamin H. Day, with No Capital Except Youth and Courage, Establishes the First Permanent Penny Newspaper.—The Curious First Number Entirely His Own Work.

IN the early thirties of last century the only newspapers in the city of New York were six-cent journals whose reading-matter was adapted to the politics of men, and whose only appeal to women was their size, perfectly suited to deep pantry-shelves.

Dave Ramsey, a compositor on one of these sixpennies, the *Journal of Commerce*, had an obsession. It was that a penny paper, to be called the *Sun*, would be a success in a city full of persons whose interest was in humanity in general, rather than in politics, and whose pantry-shelves were of negligible width. Why his mind fastened on the *Sun* as the name of this child of his vision is not known; perhaps it was because there was a daily in London bearing that title. It was a short name, easily written, easily spoken, easily remembered.

Benjamin H. Day, another printer, worked beside Dave Ramsey in 1830. Ramsey reiterated his idea to his neighbour so often that Day came to believe in it, although it is doubtful whether he had the great faith that possessed Ramsey. Now that due credit has been given to Ramsey for the idea of the penny *Sun*, he passes out of the record, for he never attempted to put his project into execution.

Nor was Day's enthusiasm for a penny *Sun* so big that he plunged into it at once. He was a business man rather than a visionary. With the savings from his wages as a compositor he went into the job-printing business in a small way. He still met his old chums and still talked of the *Sun*, but it is likely that he never would have come to start it if it had not been for the cholera.

There was an epidemic of this plague in New York in 1832. It killed more than thirty-five hundred people in that year, and added to the depression of business already caused by financial disturbances and a wretched banking system. The job-printing trade suffered with other industries, and Day decided that he needed a newspaper—not to reform, not to uplift, not to arouse, but to push the printing business of Benjamin H. Day. Incidentally he might add lustre to the fame of the President, Andrew Jackson, or uphold the hands of the mayor of New York, Gideon Lee; but his prime purpose was to get the work of printing handbills for John Smith, the grocer, or letter-heads for Richard Robinson, the dealer in hay. Incidentally he might become rich and powerful, but for the time being he needed work at his trade.

Ben Day was only twenty-three years old. He was the son of Henry Day, a hatter of West Springfield, Massachusetts, and Mary Ely Day; and sixth in descent from his first American ancestor, Robert Day. Shortly after the establishment of the Springfield *Republican* by Samuel Bowles, in 1824, young Day went into the office of that paper, then a weekly, to learn the printer's trade. That was two years before the birth of the second and greater Samuel Bowles, who was later to make the *Republican*, as a daily, one of the greatest of American newspapers.



BENJAMIN H. DAY

A Bust in the Possession of Mrs. Florence A. Snyder, Summit, N. J.

Day learned well his trade from Sam Bowles. When he was twenty, and a first-class compositor, he went to New York, and worked at the case in the offices of the *Evening Post* and the *Commercial Advertiser*. He married, when he was twenty-one, Miss Eveline Shepard. At the time of the *Sun's* founding Mr. Day lived, with his wife and their infant son, Henry, at 75 Duane Street, only a few blocks from the newspaper offices.

Day was a good-looking young man with a round, calm, resolute face. He possessed health, industry, and character. Also he had courage, for a man with a family was taking no small risk in launching, without capital, a paper to be sold at one cent.

The idea of a penny paper was not new. In Philadelphia, the *Cent* had had a brief, inglorious existence. In Boston, the *Bostonian* had failed to attract the cultured readers of the modern Athens. Eight months before Day's hour arrived the *Morning Post* had braved it in New York, selling first at two cents and later at one cent, but even with Horace Greeley as one of the founders it lasted only three weeks.

When Ben Day sounded his friends, particularly the printers, as to their opinion of his project, they cited the doleful fate of the other penny journals. He drew, or had designed, a head-line for the *Sun* that was to be, and took it about to his cronies. A. S. Abell, a printer on the *Mercantile Advertiser*, poked the most fun at him. A penny paper, indeed! But this same Abell lived to stop scoffing, to found another *Sun*—this one in Baltimore—and to buy a half-million-dollar estate out of the profits of it. He was the second beneficiary of the penny *Sun* idea.

William M. Swain, another journeyman printer, also made light of Day's ambition. He lived to be Day's foreman, and later to own the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*. He told Day that the penny *Sun* would ruin him. As Day had not much enthusiasm at the outset, surely his friends did not add to it, unless by kindling his stubbornness.

As for capital, he had none at all, in the money sense. He did have a printing-press, hardly improved from the machine of Benjamin Franklin's day, some job-paper, and plenty of type. The press would throw off two hundred impressions an hour at full speed, man power. He hired a room, twelve by sixteen feet, in the building at 222 William Street. That building was still there, in the shadow of the Brooklyn

Bridge approach, when the *Sun* celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1883; but a modern six-story envelope factory is on the site to-day.

There is no question as to the general authorship of the first paper. Day was proprietor, publisher, editor, chief pressman, and mailing-clerk. He was not a lazy man. He stayed up all the night before that fateful Tuesday, September 3, 1833, setting with his own hands some advertisements that were regularly appearing in the six-cent papers, for he wanted to make a show of prosperity.

He also wrote, or clipped from some out-of-town newspaper, a poem that would fill nearly a column. He rewrote news items from the West and South—some of them not more than a month old. As for the snappy local news of the day, he bought, in the small hours of that Tuesday morning, a copy of the *Courier and Enquirer*, the liveliest of the six-cent papers, took it to the single room in William Street, clipped out or rewrote the police-court items, and set them up himself. A boy, whose name is unknown to fame, assisted him at devil's work. A journeyman printer, Parmlee, helped with the press when the last quoin had been made tight in the fourth and last of the little pages.

The sun was well up in the sky before its namesake of New York came slowly, hesitatingly, almost sadly, up over the horizon of journalism—never to set! In the years to follow, the *Sun* was to have changes in ownership, in policy, in size, and in style, but no week-day was to come when it could not shine. Of all the morning newspapers printed in New York on that 3rd of September, 1833, there is only one other—the *Journal of Commerce*—left.

But young Mr. Day, wiping the ink from his hands at noon, and waiting in doubt to see whether the public would buy the thousand *Suns* he had printed, could not foresee this. Neither could he know that, by this humble effort to exalt his printing business, he had driven a knife into the sclerotic heart of ancient journalism. The sixpenny papers were to laugh at this tiny intruder—to laugh and laugh, and to die.

The size of the first *Sun* was eleven and one-quarter by eight inches, not a great deal bigger than a sheet of commercial letter paper, and considerably less than one-quarter the size of a page of the *Sun* of to-day. Compared with the first *Sun*, the present newspaper is about sixteen times larger. The type was a good, plain face of agate, with some verse on the last page in nonpareil.

An almost perfect reprint of the first *Sun* was issued as a supplement to the paper on its twentieth birthday, in 1853, and again—to the number of about one hundred and sixty thousand copies—on its fiftieth birthday, in 1883. Many of the persons who treasure the replicas of 1883 believe them to be original first numbers, as they were not labelled “Presented gratuitously to the subscribers of the *Sun*,” as was the issue of 1853. Hardly a month passes by but the *Sun* receives one of them from some proud owner. It is easy, however, to tell the reprint from the original, for Mr. Day in his haste committed an error at the masthead of the editorial or second page of the first number. The date-line there reads “September 3, 1832,” while in the reprints it is “September 3, 1833,” as it should have been, but wasn’t, in the original. And there are minor typographical differences, invisible to the layman.

Of the thousand, or fewer, copies of the first *Sun*, only five are known to exist—one in the bound file of the *Sun*’s first year, held jealously in the *Sun*’s safe; one in the private library of the editor of the *Sun*, Edward Page Mitchell; one in the Public Library at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, New York; and two in the library of the American Type Founders Company, Jersey City.

There were three columns on each of the four pages. At the top of the first column on the front page was a modest announcement of the *Sun*’s ambitions:

The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of every one, ALL THE NEWS OF THE DAY, and at the same time afford an advantageous medium for advertising.

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