

# Former Post-Dispatch editor: Joseph Pulitzer set the template for American newspapers

The story of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* is embodied in the ideals of the man who founded it in 1878, said Richard H. Weiss, a former editor at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Weiss introduced a [new documentary](#) on Joseph Pulitzer on [June 6 at the St. Louis Jewish Film Festival](#). Known as the “Pulitzer Platform,” the ideals of the first Joseph Pulitzer, who purchased the bankrupt *St. Louis Dispatch* at a public auction and merged it with the *St. Louis Evening Post*, set the *Post-Dispatch* apart from other news organizations, Weiss said. The platform concluded: “never be satisfied with merely printing news, always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty.” Weiss, in explaining what the platform came to mean to him over 30 years in the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom, cited the down-to-earth words of former managing editor Dick Weil who said, “We are a lot like hockey players. We are ever willing to go into the corners, take our licks, get our noses bloodied and our teeth broken, all for the sake of getting the story.”

Here are Weiss’ full remarks at the film festival:



Courtesy of Library of Congress

**Despite my grizzled appearance,** I want to assure you that I did not know the first Joseph Pulitzer. He died in 1911, just before my time.

And yet I knew him.

And I didn't know the second Joseph Pulitzer. He died in 1955, when I was four years old.

And yet I knew him.

I did know the third Joseph Pulitzer, who died in 1993. By then, I had been at the *Post-Dispatch* 18 years. Still, we were not exactly pals. Never did lunch.

And yet I knew him very well.

I want to tell you how I knew all these men.

It started when I was about 11. By then, I had pretty strong opinions. One of them was that of the two newspapers that arrived at our house each day, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* was by far the best. The *Globe* had Peanuts, the best comic strip in the world; the Benchwarmer column, written by the earthy and wise Bob Burnes; and Dear Abby, whose advice to parents helped me keep one step ahead of my own.

When I shared this point of view with my father, he looked at me dolefully, wondering, perhaps, if he had sired an idiot.

He was kind and did not express this sentiment aloud. Rather, he explained to me that the *Post-Dispatch*, the afternoon paper, the one with the longer stories, the more elegant headlines, and the serious mien, was the quality product. Someday I would understand that.

But my father wouldn't wait for someday. And so began my education. First I was shown "the Platform." "Predatory plutocracy?" What exactly was that? And he explained.

Later, he handed me a book – coffee-table size – with the ink work of an artist known by a single name – Fitzpatrick. His editorial cartoons for the *Post-Dispatch* were bold, strident, easily understood. Good versus evil. I pored over the book again and again.

Not so with another book published by the *Post-Dispatch*: Joseph Pulitzer II's report to America after a post-war visit to the German concentration camps. The pictures were this Jewish kid's nightmarish introduction to the enormity of the Holocaust.

My father had more than a passing interest in Pulitzer. He worked at what was then KSD-TV, a Pulitzer-owned operation, just several blocks down 12th Street from the newspaper. The trade name for his television work was producer. But whenever people asked what our dad did for a living in those days, my sister and I proudly told them that dad "wrote the news."

Of course, a lot of that news came from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, for which my father held an uncommon reverence. Over the years, my father got to know several of the *Post-Dispatch* lions, as did my mother, who for many years worked in public relations for Famous-Barr. My mother would have the *P-D* luminaries over for dinner and cocktails or at times build special events for Famous-Barr around their work. Among them were the likes of Dick Dudman, the intrepid Washington bureau chief and foreign correspondent; Bill Woo, then an elegant feature writer; Sally Bixby Defty, the effervescent reporter about town; and Dick Weil, who was then a most provocative political correspondent.

So now I could attach faces and personalities to the bylines, and it wasn't long before I wanted to become one of them. And, even more, my dad wanted me to become one of them. And so I did.

When I arrived at the *Post-Dispatch* on Dec. 1, 1975, I walked into something akin to a movie set on the fifth floor. Managing editor Evarts Graham looked like Spencer Tracy. He sat at a desk in a glass office and smoked a pipe. Underwoods and Olympias clacked, and men with classy names like Selwyn Pepper in white shirts and ties shouted, "Copy!"

Graham was a Harvard grad, and many others were from Yale, Princeton, and Stanford. One reporter, not much older than me, had left Harvard Law to work for the *Post-Dispatch*.

**But after a while**, the pedigrees and sheepskins didn't matter much. The guy who taught me the most in the early going had attended the University of Vermont and State Agricultural College. But the cigar-smoking Harry Levins could take your 18 inches of hackneyed, overwrought prose and whittle it down to a crisp, engaging 10 or 12 inches in the space of a few minutes. Better yet, he could show you how you could do it.

Then there was the quiet, unassuming fellow a few desks away

who rarely seemed to smile. Yet somehow, he was the one we always wanted to please. His name was Jim Millstone.

In the 1960s, he was the man who covered the Supreme Court and the civil rights struggle for the *Post-Dispatch*. Haynes Johnson, the former Washington Post correspondent, who won a Pulitzer for his coverage of the freedom marches in Selma, Ala., in 1966, said the prize should have been Millstone's.

Millstone had risen to the rank of assistant managing editor. He was also the senior editor who stayed at work the latest, reading all the important stories and making sure they were played appropriately.

He was, in short, our sun god. He was our tie to Pulitzer's past and he was beaming a light down the path to our futures, because he was nothing if not a great teacher.

Jim died in 1992, leaving us at a transitional time in journalism – both for the *Post-Dispatch* and newspapers nationwide. *The Post-Dispatch*, fending off a takeover, had taken the company public in 1986. The Internet was peeking over the horizon; so was the so-called 24-hour news cycle. The platform with its call to “always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, and always oppose privileged classes” was joined by a series of mission statements that addressed “shareholder value.”

**All media, of course,** have had to address this tension between being businesslike and living up to the highest journalistic values. But at this paper, I'd like to believe, the angst was more palpable. Our founder was a courageous and irascible man who set the template for American newspapering much in the same way that Mark Twain did for the American novel. His son Joseph II led this newspaper to an eminence on the national stage far beyond what our city's importance then would suggest. His grandson had the foresight to take the company

into the new medium of television.

All of them had to come to terms with the family legacy and changing times. Even in the midst of so much upheaval, so many staff cuts, I hope you noticed that the Post-Dispatch has won two Pulitzer Prizes in the last few years, the latest based on the great work of Tony Messenger.

But as you might imagine, most days at the *P-D* are not soaked with celebration and champagne. They are all about perseverance.

I think Dick Weil best captured who we are and who we continue to be in remarks that he made upon his retirement 15 years ago. It may well resonate for you in another way.

“We are a lot like hockey players,” he suggested. “We are ever willing to go into the corners, take our licks, get our noses bloodied and our teeth broken, all for the sake of getting the story.” There is honor in that, if not always victory and a trophy.

That passion, I think, is peculiarly Pulitzer. It’s a striving to live up to the highest standards, and the pride of working for an institution where those standards were set and continue to endure.

Not everyone gets such an opportunity. Those of us who worked for the Pulitzers have been lucky indeed.

READ MORE: [National Documentary Traces the Life and Legacy of Joseph Pulitzer](#)

*Richard H. Weiss retired from the Post-Dispatch in 2005; he continues his work on social justice issues as a journalist under the banner of WeissWrite LLC and Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson Inc. More information at [weisswrite.com](http://weisswrite.com) and [beforefergusonbeyondferguson.com](http://beforefergusonbeyondferguson.com). This speech was adapted and from an article Weiss wrote in 2004 when Lee Enterprises*

*acquired the Pulitzer properties.*