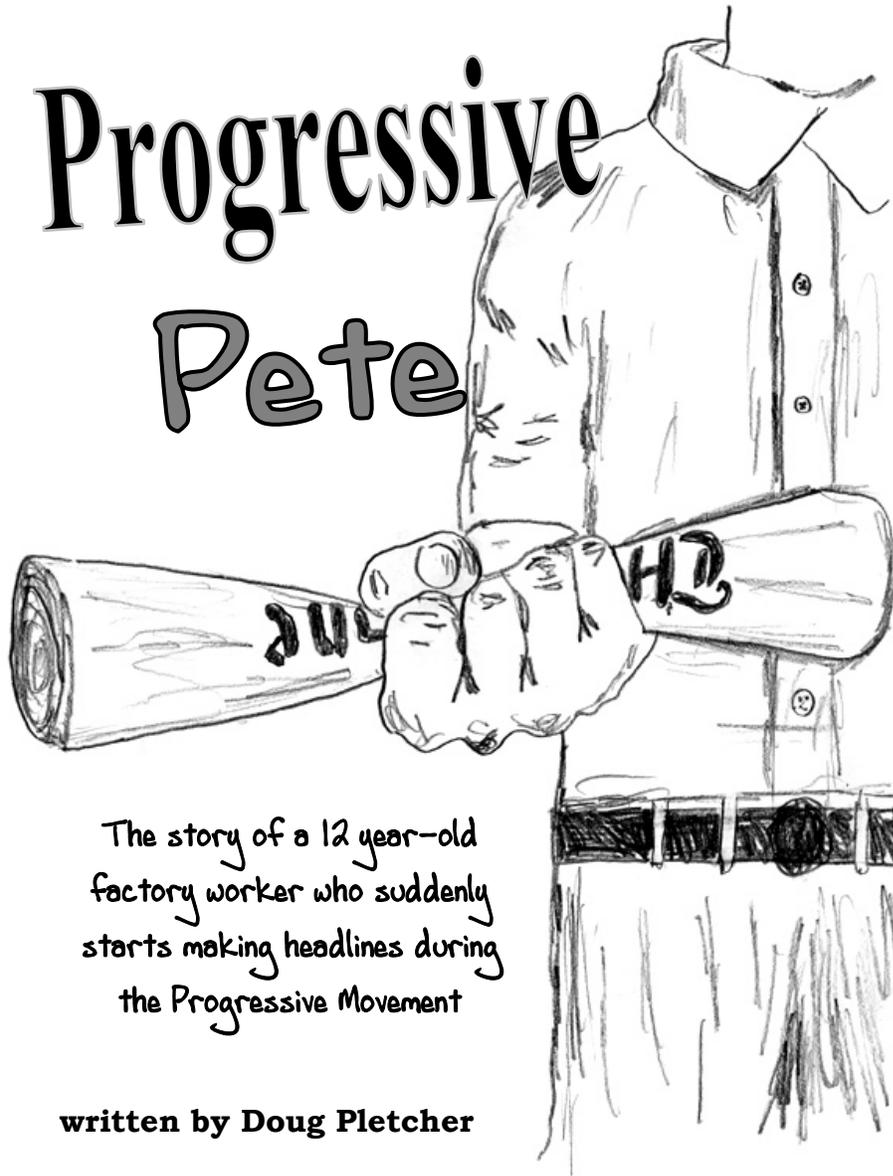


Progressive Pete



The story of a 12 year-old
factory worker who suddenly
starts making headlines during
the Progressive Movement

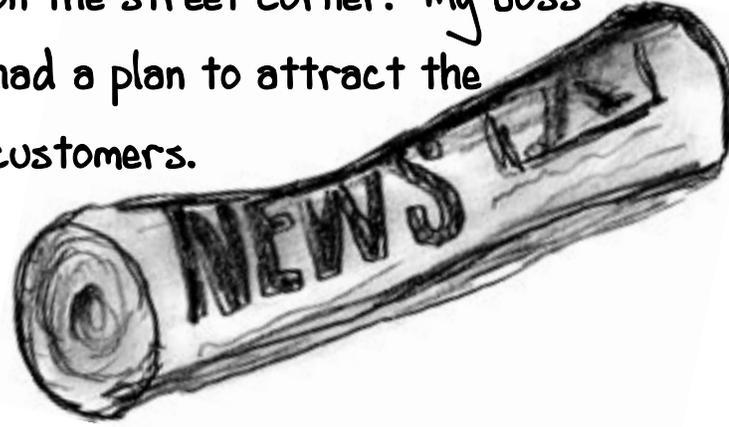
written by Doug Pletcher

Homecourt  Publishers



Greenville, SC

My job was to sell newspapers on the street corner. My boss had a plan to attract the customers.



6 - Reading Between the Lines

"Are you ready to sell some papers?" Mr. Rafferty asked me when I walked into the office the next morning. It was still dark outside, so I was surprised by his enthusiasm.

As usual, he didn't wait for me to answer. He handed me several bundles of newspapers and told me to follow him into the street. I was struggling under the weight of the bundles. Mr. Rafferty, who only had a light backpack draped over his shoulder, didn't seem to notice my distress.

"This is our lucky street corner," he said after we walked four blocks. He reached into his backpack and pulled out a tightly rolled banner.

"What's that?" I asked him.

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“Advertising. It’s our sign so people know what you’re selling.” He tossed me his keys. “You’ll see after you get back here with some more newspapers.”

I did as he asked. When I returned, I almost dropped everything from the shock of what was in front of me. Mr. Rafferty’s banner had a picture of me on it. It was the one that had been on the front page of the newspaper – the one that had gotten me fired from the mill.

In large letters above my picture was “*The Progressive.*” Under it were the words: “*Get Your Copy from the Famous Ex-Steel Mill Worker, Progressive Pete.*”

Progressive Pete? Famous? Me?

“Mr. Rafferty?” was all I could manage to say. I didn’t even know what questions to ask.

“You’re a star, Pete. You’re the one who helped end child labor at the steel mill. People come by to see you, and they buy one of my newspapers.”

I shrugged. Mr. Rafferty was paying me, so who was I to argue. “It’s a little strange to see my mug up on a wall,” was my only response.

“It’ll catch people’s attention,” he said. “You just stand here calling out to people who pass by. See how many papers you can sell. It’s simple.”

Mr. Rafferty went back to the office, and I put on the sling and stuffed it with papers. Within a few minutes, the street traffic began picking up.

The newspapers started selling fast,
and the money started coming in.



Then people started to notice me. They'd ask, "How's it feel selling papers instead of melting metal?" and patting me on the shoulder as they walked off. I felt famous and important. I guess, in a small way, I was.

More importantly, the papers were selling fast. When Mr. Rafferty came out to check on me after a few hours, he asked, "Pete, where are all your papers?"

"I'm on my last bundle right now," I answered. He ran back to the office and brought me the last bundles. They sold out in less than thirty minutes.

I arrived back at the office to cheers and applause.

"Pete," Mr. Rafferty said, "you just sold our entire run of papers. They were supposed to last us all

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week!” A smile came across his face, “So there’s money to be made in news, after all.”

I spent the rest of the day bundling more papers, and Mr. Rafferty asked me to come in early again the next morning. And the next morning. And the next. He had new locations he wanted me to try all around the city – and I sold out of the papers everywhere I went.

Before I knew it, I was spending more time working for *The Progressive* than I ever had at the steel mill. All morning I’d sell papers, and all afternoon I’d help prepare the next morning’s batch.

When payday came, I realized that it was all worth it. For my first two weeks of work, I made over \$20. Mr. Rafferty said that there was more where that came from – if I kept on selling so many papers.

More people were hired, and we started putting out a new paper twice a week. The new employees took care of the bundling so I didn’t waste my time. All I had to do was stand under the “Progressive Pete” banner and sell papers.

Mr. Rafferty also devised a new selling strategy. He selected fifteen different street corners. I’d stay at one for a few hours, and then move to the next. By the end of the week, I’d covered most of the downtown area.

The strategy worked. After two weeks, I had a \$35 paycheck! I never thought I’d make that much money.

Mr. Rafferty said
that the key to
selling newspapers is
to have exciting
headlines to catch a
person's eye.



"It's all about the headlines," Mr. Rafferty said when he tried to explain to me how to sell newspapers.

"Have you ever read *The Jungle*, Pete?" I hadn't, but as usual he didn't bother to wait for my response.

"That book's a real eye-opener. When it was published, we carried the headline '*Meat Industry Shocker: What You're Eating Might Kill You!*' It was all anyone talked about for weeks—and it was great for sales."

After our talk, I started to notice the headlines that were printed on the front page of *The Progressive*. Each day was something new:

"Women's Suffrage Rally Draws Record Crowd"

"City Officials Caught Taking Bribes"

"Alcohol to Blame for Saloon Fight."

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“Remember these headlines, Pete.” Mr. Rafferty said. “They are the core of the Progressive Movement.” He swelled up with pride when he said this.

After working more than sixty hours one week, I decided I had earned the right to question Mr. Rafferty on his “Progressive” beliefs.

“If you think child labor is bad,” I said, “then why do you let me work so much? I’m only twelve years old, you know.”

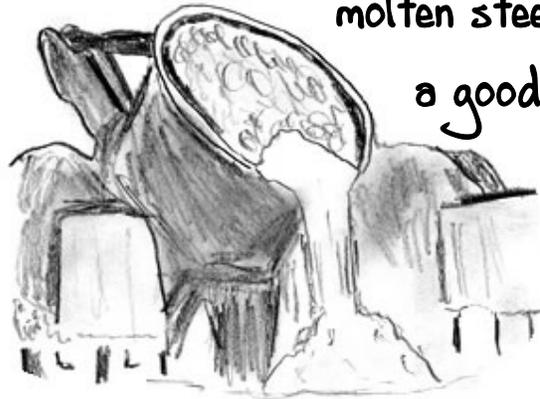
I worried that he might think I was complaining, so I quickly added, “I’m glad to work here, and you bet my family and I like all the new money. I just think it’s funny that I work just as much here as I did at the steel mill.”

“Pete,” Mr. Rafferty said with a smile, “When it comes right down to it, I’m just here to sell newspapers. People get excited when you talk about child labor, or Big Business, or political corruption. Those headlines make money. I’m happy to support the Progressive Movement – if it doesn’t get in the way of my sales.”

That was the first time I’d heard him refer to himself as a businessman. If he wasn’t selling so many newspapers then I wouldn’t have a job.

“Gotcha, boss,” I said, and I meant it. I didn’t mind working all the hours, so long as the nice paychecks kept coming.

The steel mill would never let an untrained person get near the blast furnace and the molten steel. That'd be



a good way to get yourself killed.

“Speaking of headlines, Pete,” he continued, “I need a good one for tomorrow. Got any ideas?” He was just thinking aloud, so I didn’t say anything. “Hey, you worked in the mill – tell me about it.”

I was happy to tell my story. I described my daily routine, and talked about some of the injuries I’d seen in the shipyard, and even one death when a pile of scrap metal fell on a worker.

Overall, though, I told him that it was good work and that everyone did their best to avoid accidents.

“Did management ever force anyone to work at the blast furnace without training?” he asked when I was telling him about the inside of the factory.

“No way. I worked in the yard, so I was never allowed to touch the furnace. You’d be crazy to get near that thing if you didn’t know what you were doing. If

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you were lucky, you'd just destroy the machine instead of the whole mill."

"You're sure?" He repeated himself. "Nobody was forced to work on things they weren't trained on?"

"No, sir," I repeated. "not in a million years. Like I said, most of the accidents happened near the ends of shifts, when we all got tired and sloppy."

"We've already done stories on that," he said, and started talking to himself under his breath. "What if some of the steel was deformed or not measured correctly? Did you ship it out anyway?"

"Are you kidding?," I said. "If an order was wrong, everyone on floor was in big trouble. The managers were always telling us that the customers wouldn't lose any sleep buying from our competitors if we didn't get things right."

Mr. Rafferty muttered "thanks," but I don't think my stories were as exciting as he had hoped. He began to work on the next day's headlines, and I headed home to get some sleep.

The next morning, I was a little shocked to see the headline of the newspaper I was selling. It said: "*Inside Secrets of a Dangerous Steel Mill.*"

It caught my eye, so I did my best to stumble through words of the article.

Some of the things I'd told Mr. Rafferty were in there – sort of. He also mentioned lots of things I *never* said. The article talked about unskilled laborers on the

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machines, and shipments of bad steel. He even said that the supervisors threatened to punish workers if the customers complained.

Of course, the article said that the source “wanted to remain nameless” – but I knew that I was the source.

My words had been twisted. Plain and simple.

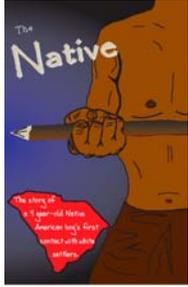
I still had a job to do, though, so I went through the rest of my day like I always did. But I began to wonder if *everything* that was printed in the paper was a lie – or at least it wasn't the truth.



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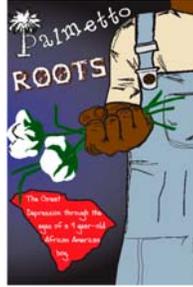
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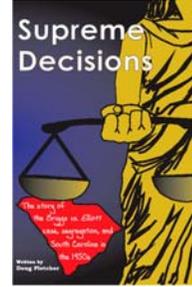
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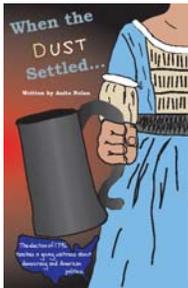
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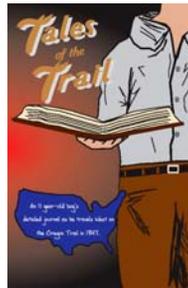
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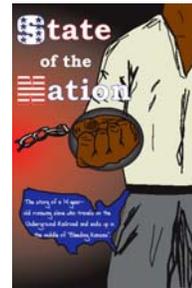
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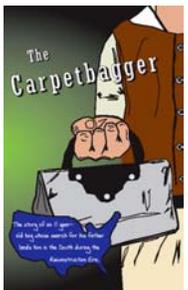
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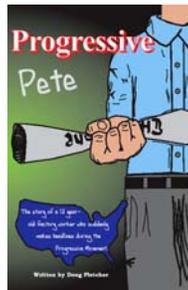
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