



Back In Time

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

Canillita

When I graduated from the British Schools, my father wanted to send me to his old school in England to get a university education. But I balked, and said that further academic study was of no interest to me because I wanted a career in advertising. My father said, “Well, the main thing is to learn how to think, and I suppose life can teach you that.” And then, in his usual quiet way, he set about finding me a job at the Montevideo headquarters of the J. Walter Thompson Company. It was the smallest branch office of the largest international advertising agency in the world. I was hired as the office boy—which made me the lowliest employee in the global JWT hierarchy—and I reasoned that from there I could only go up.

But first I had to be an office boy which, of course, consisted mainly of running errands. If artwork had to be taken to an engraving studio to make a plate that then had to be delivered to a newspaper office, I would do the taking and delivering. If a client received some new designs from the head office in Miami and wanted the agency to take a look, I would go and get them. Most of the time I walked or took a bus, but sometimes there were special trips, perhaps involving money or a matter of urgency, and then I would travel in style in the back seat of a taxi, puffing on a cigarette and loving my job.

My job also included a daily trip around town to pick up newspapers. The agency was required to attach ‘tear sheets’ to invoices as proof that an ad had been published, and I had to collect them. This meant going to the nine daily newspapers that were published in Montevideo in the early 1960s. I was thrilled with this part of my duties because I loved riding the busses and was a huge admirer of *canillitas*, the boys who sold newspapers on the streets. I had always been in awe of their grace and agility as they swung on and off the back steps of speeding busses, carrying an armful of newspapers and shouting “¡Diario!” I had made modest attempts at jumping off the back step of a moving number 118 bus on a couple of occasions but knew I was not even remotely in their class. Nonetheless there I was, carrying a satchel full of newspapers, riding

around town on the back platform of a bus just like a *canillita*!

El Día was a popular newspaper at the time and I became quite familiar with their premises at the corner of Avenida 18 de Julio and Yaguarón. There was a loading dock around the side where, long before dawn, trucks picked up stacks of freshly printed newspapers, still warm from the presses, and delivered them far and wide. At the back of the loading dock there was a door that opened into a short, dingy hallway that led to a cavernous room of gigantic proportions, most of it in deep shadow. There was a long counter where a crusty old man dispensed copies of the day’s edition to newsboys, office boys, and surly-looking street kiosk operators. There was no natural light and the place was dimly lit when the presses weren’t running, just a soft yellow glow cast over the counter by a single, naked bulb dangling overhead. Other than the often lively exchanges at the counter, the place had a dismal, gloomy feeling about it that was reminiscent of the lyrics: “Where the rain never falls and the sun never shines / It’s dark as a dungeon way down in the mines.” It was dirty and had a gritty, acrid stench of ink and newsprint that got into my clothes and my nose and stayed with me for hours. It was an intimidating place, with a rough-looking crowd thronging in and out, and I tried to appear as tough as possible as I elbowed my way in to collect my papers.

Off to one side, at quite a distance from the counter, in the shadows at the far end of the huge room, there were what looked like makeshift mattresses tucked in under an overhang along the length of the wall. One morning I was peering at them as I packed my newspapers into my satchel, standing next to an older boy from another agency. He nodded in that direction and said, quite softly, “That’s where some of the *canillitas* sleep. This is where they live! Can you imagine?” I walked back onto the loading dock and out into the daylight in the street. Like the smell of the print room, that question haunted me for the rest of the day, making me think about things that had never occurred to me before. Life had wasted no time in proving my father right.