

My First Pay Envelope

By Patrick J. Leonard

When my grandson Chris phoned and happily told me that he had just received and photocopied his first paycheck, it brought back memories of the long-ago day when I received my first pay envelope. Chris will always have a copy of his check, but my first pay envelope is long gone.

It was 1932, in the depths of the Depression. I was the eldest of six kids; I had a brother and four sisters. My dad had been laid off his job as the manager of a chain store when his firm merged with a larger outfit. Now he worked at temporary factory jobs whenever he could.

We lived near the center of a small mill town about 15 miles south of Boston. Ours was a large, ramshackle wooden house with four bedrooms and an upstairs bathroom. A couple of factory hands roomed in two of the bedrooms and took their meals in the local diner.

My mother, a buoyant native of Aran Island, Galway Bay, Ireland, scraped together enough from their shrinking funds and money that we kids contributed from babysitting and doing chores for neighbors to keep us going. Still, we were in imminent danger of the bank foreclosing on our mortgage.

Mum and Dad had purchased the house on July 13, 1920, for \$3,300. They paid \$300 down, and the monthly payments were \$30.75. There was a crisis every month as we scraped up \$30.75 to pay Old Man Grimes, the president and sole employee of the local cooperative bank.

Work at the mills was sporadic. One day, news spread that the rubber factory needed some young men, as a large, unexpected order with a due date had been received. Applicants had to be at least 18 years old. It was midsummer. I had turned 15 on May 1; my buddy, George Angus, was 16. Both of us were large for our age. The town clerk issued work permits. We managed to pilfer some of the blank forms, type them out in a nearby vacant office, and forge the clerk's signature.

We set off with a great deal of trepidation, but to our surprise, we were hired without question.

George was assigned to the heel press department, and I was sent to the elastic band section.

Elastic bands are made like this: Thick, foot-long rubber strips are fed into a machine. They emerge as a tube with powder blowing through it to keep it from sticking together. The tube drops onto a belt on a 10-foot-long table. At the end of the table, the machine operator cuts the tube using large scissors.

The "rodman" at the end of the table inserts an 8-foot iron rod through the tube, picks it up, and places the rod and tube in a slot on a special four-wheeled contraction. When all its tiers are filled, it is wheeled away into a large vulcanizer, which looks something like a railroad tank car and is about half that size.

The door is shut and steam applied.

Later, the carriages are wheeled out, and the rubber is removed from the rods and taken to the cutter. This device is a short table with what looks like an old-fashioned lawn mower. The operator pushes the tubes into rollers and the cutter chops the tubes into the desired size. Although the cutting device has a guard shield, many operators lost fingers.

Fortunately, I developed a skill as a rodman. We were on piecework, and I became popular with the machine operators, because I could handle the smallest tubes, which sped down the table compared to the larger elastic bands. Finally, payday! Two men from the office arrived, one carrying a wooden box about 2 feet long and a foot wide. It was crammed with small brown envelopes, each lettered with the employee's name and amount earned.

What a thrill when one of the men handed me a small brown envelope with my name and the amount \$14.40 written on the flap! I had not worked a full week, but it was the most money I had ever earned in my life. The operator got more than \$30, but he had worked a full week and some overtime besides. (Incidentally, there was no such thing as time and a half, at least in that factory.) He was married, had four kids, and drove to work every day from the next town, along with some paying passengers.

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Without even opening it, I wrapped my treasure in a handkerchief and stuffed it into a pocket so it could not fall out.

When I got home, the entire family gathered around the kitchen table as I unwrapped the pay envelope. I spilled out coins and pulled out two \$5 bills and four singles. This called for a celebration!

Sister Mary was 13; Ann, 12; Betty, 10; John, 8; and Peggy, 5. Mum handed Mary a \$5 bill and told her to go downtown for ice cream, devil dogs and penny candy—and to be sure to bring back quarters in change. All the other kids except Peggy went with her. They returned happily with the goodies.

There was plenty of change. Mum handed each of the kids a quarter—big money for a little kid. Then, another surprise! Mum walked into the rear pantry and carried out a gorgeous cake with chocolate frosting. It was a great day for the family.

At the end of summer vacation, George returned to the public high school. But because my father became ill, I continued working night shifts during my junior and senior years. I attended a parochial high school, and the nuns tactfully overlooked some dozing now and then, knowing that I was the prime support of my family.

Disaster struck the last winter. We fell behind in our mortgage payments. Dad, a courageous man, picked up part-time jobs here and there, although he had not fully recovered from his illness.

Mr. Grimes summoned him to the bank. The cooperative bank was in the rear of a long room. Mr. Grimes had his desk next to a huge walk-in safe.

Dad was given an ultimatum: The arrears had to be paid in full within a month, or the bank would foreclose. Mr. Grimes explained that the bank itself was having troubles due to the Depression, and he regretted this drastic measure.

Mary and Ann found a rental on a nearby street and, with the help of friends, the family moved. That day I was working the 4–12 shift. I did not know where we were moving. A neighbor, Mrs. Stevenson, met me walking up from the mill after midnight and took me to our new home.

The move was a shock. Things improved rapidly, however, and happiness returned to the family. But that foreclosure left its mark on us.

We all became home owners and successful later in life. Then another great event took place, when we children purchased a home for our parents. ❖