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A Stroke of Luck During Hard Times: Newspaper Contests, Then and Now

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This ad in The Boston Evening American, December 3, 1929, shows what a prizewinner might have bought for \$5 or \$10 in Christmas of that year.



Eva Mahoney's doll, Nancy, left, with a similar doll from December 1929, as advertised by Gilchrist's in The Evening American.

The Daily Record cost 2 cents in 1929. In the weeks leading up to Christmas that year, the Boston newspaper and ancestor of today's Herald reported the collapse of the stock market and stories of financial ruin. Perhaps as an antidote to the gloom and doom, the paper also ran contests, or chances for people otherwise down on their luck to get lucky. Those who solved the daily crossword puzzle could win a ticket to see a "talkie" at the Scollay Square Olympia downtown. Purveyors of outrageous facts had a chance at the \$100 grand prize in "Ripley's Believe It Or Not." And anyone who bought the paper and a stamp could send in daily "X-mas Cheer Coupons" worth \$1 to \$15 if Santa drew your name. It was through one such newspaper contest that Cambridge resident Eva Mahoney received a Christmas present she would cherish 79 years after her mother won it for her from The Daily Record.

Eva told her mother's story: "My father didn't have any work, and there was no money, no nothing, and she wanted to get me a Christmas present, and she didn't know what she could do 'cause she didn't have any money. So there was this ad in the paper and it said, you know, one of the prizes was a doll. So my mother entered the contest, and she won the doll. So I won't part with her. She's my pride and joy. Her name is Nancy. And she came with a beautiful yellow silk dress. She was, she was just a lovely doll. People wonder why I have the doll, well, that's why."

The Mahoney family had a Christmas routine, and during the Depression, it often served to remind them of the hard times they faced. Christmas Eve, the family went to Aunt Lillian's house in Harvard Square for dinner. (In fact, the family went there for dinner every day, since Mrs. Mahoney's oldest sister and her husband owned a boarding house and had "enough money to get along," whereas the Mahoney's "didn't have any way of making any money.") So Christmas Eve, a large group of relatives gathered at "Auntie's" house to eat "fancy food" and make merry.

Christmas morning, Eva and her family opened presents at home, and at noon, they returned to Auntie's house for Christmas dinner, which was always turkey. After dinner, they visited the home of Eva's uncle Jerry and his family, who lived in Watertown and were relatively rich. Uncle Jerry owned Billings and Stover, a famous drugstore in Harvard Square. Jerry and his wife had two kids, and the finery of Eva's cousin, Betty, made the Depression seem even worse. "We used to go to her house Christmas, and she'd have beautiful robes and games and everything that I didn't have, you know, and I used to feel so bad." One year, Betty got a gift to make one green with envy: "And what bothered me most, see, my cousin had pencils with her name on them. And I thought, 'oh, how wonderful, if I could only have some pencils with my name on it!' you know? But of course they had plenty of money so they could get what they wanted."

Christmas of 1929, though, was a happy Christmas, one of the two happiest Eva remembers. Mostly she relies on what her mother told her of that day. The family lived in Watertown, then, in a two-family house with a cat named Billy and kids to play with downstairs. She went to Auntie's house for Christmas Eve and opened the doll

Christmas morning. After 79 years, Eva's memories of the details have faded, but her delight in the doll has not. "All I can say, she was very beautiful when I got her. And she still has a beautiful face. She looks like a baby." That Christmas day, the advantages of Cousin Betty must have been easier to bear.

Eva played with Nancy all the time, and imagination was the rule of the game. "Oh, I made believe she had to go to the doctor. I made believe we had to go shopping. I used to say to her, 'Do you feel good? Is there anything the matter?' You know, just like you would a baby. I used to love to play with her."

Today Nancy sits in a black chair in the living room of Eva's efficiency apartment. Her head reaches just above the back of her chair and her legs stick straight out from it, showing the bottoms of her bare feet. Her mouth is open in a smile. She has big fat cheeks and a dainty nose. Her old eyes are brown with rust and rimmed with thick lashes. Her eyebrows and hair are painted on (golden), but she has some curls textured into the plastic on top of her head. Her fleshy arms are bent by her sides, and she has rolls of fat at her wrists and elbows. Her head, arms and legs are made of composition, a material made of sawdust and glue, while her body is made of cloth. Underneath her ruffled underpants, she has a button you could once push to make

her cry. She could also "go to sleep" at one point, though her eyelids are stuck, now. She doesn't cry any longer, either (maybe she's grown out of it.).

Indeed, the baby doll turned 79 this Christmas, one month after her mother, Eva, turned 86. She does show her age. "She's cracked like her mother," Eva says. But in fact, Nancy would be much worse than cracked if Eva and her mother hadn't repaired her years ago. "My mother redid her because she was falling apart, and so my mother redid her, her body... I was an adult when she did, 'cause she knew how much I loved it and we were going to have to throw her away because she was in such bad condition." Eva jokes that, "You know why she looks so bad? 'Cause she went through the crash. She went through the Depression, and that's why she looks so bad."

Eva's doll, Nancy, was born during the Great Depression and has lived to see what many have called the worst economic crisis ever since. The newspaper contest Mrs. Mahoney won came at a time of great need for the Mahoney family. In December, 2008, The Boston Globe ran a contest offering 16 lucky readers a trip for four to Universal Studios. Does a contest during today's hard times hold the same meaning as it did in the 30's?

27-year-old Abby Koocher, like so many Americans, feels the "strain" of today's economy. A free-lance video artist for MTV, Koocher saw several of her friends and co-workers, along with about 870 MTV staff, lose their jobs before Christmas this year. Though she still has her job, money is tight: "Making sure I have enough money to pay my rent and pay my health insurance and be able to enjoy life is always straining, and now, especially, with how much shit we're in." For her, the rough times made it that much more exciting when The Boston Globe called in early January to notify her that she had won a trip for four to Universal Studios. Koocher, who lives in New York City most of the year, entered the Universal Orlando Resort Sweepstakes contest in the paper while visiting her parents in Boston this Christmas. She plans to share the three-day, three-night vacation to Universal Orlando with the people she loves most. "I'm taking my three best friends from college with me. So I'm really excited, cause one of them I haven't seen in five years...and then the other two are two of my best friends who I love very much...They're my family, you know, so we really are going on a family trip." It's a trip that would have been otherwise out of reach: "I wouldn't have even thought about going on a trip any time in the near future 'cause it's too expensive."

Joy Colarullo, an executive assistant from Metrowest, also won a trip from the Globe. She and her husband been planning to take a vacation this year to celebrate a "significant birthday...and a significant wedding anniversary," but they hadn't worked out the details of when and where they would go. The Globe contest decided for them. Now they can take another trip, save the money for another trip or "or just save it, period. Buy a new couch or something."

For the Mahoney's, Koocher, and Colarullo, newspaper contests were unexpected gifts during hard times: a Christmas present, a reunion with old friends, a pre-paid anniversary trip. As Colarullo puts it, "Especially in this economy. Nice to win a free trip." A prize is like a present from contest sponsors to the winner.

Do newspapers view their contests that way? Do they run contests out of generosity?

Amanda Rottier, marketing manager at The Boston Globe, was in charge of the Universal Orlando Resort Sweepstakes this year and says that the contest was a "business decision." She continued to explain that Universal Orlando had proposed the contest and the Globe had accepted what turned out to be a mutually beneficial business deal: Universal Orlando paid for the prize trips, while the Globe administered the contest. "We had the opportunity to give these trips to our readers and drive sales of the paper in order to do that and they got the chance to promote the prize basically for free, 'cause they didn't have to pay for any advertising." For the last three years, the Globe has done Universal Orlando contests, and Rottier says that "it does pretty well for us. It boosts our single copy sales by like 12%."

Rottier pointed out that a "business objective" is a timeless feature of newspaper contests. "It's always a way for us to give attention to something. So we rarely, we would probably never do a contest that didn't have incremental benefit to us. So I think in the past when newspapers ran contests it was probably because they wanted to drive sales of the paper just like it is today."

In 1929, the contests the Mahoney's might have entered all had their business objectives, some obvious, some more subtle. In some cases, it was nothing more than that readers had to buy the paper to get an entry form, in the case of the "X-mas Cheer Coupons" or the daily crossword prize in The Daily Record. The Evening American offered young readers prizes for selling subscriptions. Other contests clearly benefited sponsoring companies; for example, Edison Electric sponsored a "Christmas Lighting Contest," in The Watertown Sun.

Comparing today's contests with those from 1929 does reveal how times have changed. The Watertown Sun's "Prize of the Week" contest had separate prizes for boys and girls. A baked bean recipe contest in The Daily Record probably thought itself very generous in noting that the contest WAS open to men. The price of a paper has gone up from 2 cents (for The Daily Record) to \$0.75 (for The Boston Herald), along with the price of a stamp to mail in the contest coupon, not to mention the sums of money offered as prizes and the sorts of things those sums could buy. Where one could once win a doll, one now can win a trip to Florida. What has not changed is the joy and excitement of winning a contest.

Tracking Down Mrs. Mahoney's Contest

Black Thursday was October 29, 1929. Eva Mahoney turned seven on November 22 of that year. She remembers living in Watertown when she received the doll, and her family moved to Cambridge when she was eight. The only year of the Depression when Eva lived in Watertown was 1929, so if her memories are correct, she received the doll on Christmas of that year. Eva remembered that her family subscribed to what she called "The Boston Record," at the time. The Boston Record is an ancestor of today's Boston Herald and in 1929, had three editions, owned by newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst. There was The Daily Record, a morning paper, The Evening American, and The Sunday Advertiser, with names derived from previous publications. Henry Scannell, Curator of Microtext and Newspapers of the Boston Public Library, says that Hearst "went in quite a bit for promotions." Scannell characterized Hearst's papers, as well as other papers of the day: "Hearst believed in sort of snappy sensational news; he sold the tabloid papers of the day. The [Boston]Post also had sort of a tabloid sensibility - they sold crime stories, police reports, human interest stories. The Globe, the Herald and the [Evening] Traveler were more based towards a home audience and might be more respectable...The [Evening] Transcript was the paper that the upper classes read...The [Christian Science] Monitor had very good analytical coverage but they also, as a church-based paper, skipped scandal, basically, didn't cover crime or medicine, particularly."

A search through The Daily Record, in October, November and December, 1929, revealed many a contest but they were all for cash prizes, none

offered a doll, and none listed Eva Mahoney as winner. The Watertown Sun, which would have been the Mahoney's local paper that year, offered a "Prize of the Week" contest in which entrants could win toys for successfully answering questions and riddles. Sounds close to Eva's description of the contest her mother entered: a "questions and answers" contest with "lots of prizes," including a doll. No cigar, though, because that contest was limited to kids and didn't offer a doll as a prize. Young readers of The Evening American could win a doll if they sold several newspaper subscriptions...but the doll offered was not Nancy, and the contest was for kids, not adults.

As Eva said when I pried her about whether she'd opened the doll Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, "As long as I opened it." Eva's doll represents all of these newspaper contests. The sentiment relies not on details.

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