

3-12-96

First Job

I graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas in January, 1937. I wanted to go to college but didn't yet know where I wanted to go or even whether I could come up with the necessary financing. I tried for a time to find a job to occupy the months before September, but the sales jobs I could have had terrified me. With my parents' approval, I decided that attending business school would be a smart move no matter what happened about college. After investigating several schools, I chose the Shamberger Business College for several reasons, not the least of which was the shortness of the course and the comparatively small tuition. Not only that, it was conveniently on the same bus and streetcar route I had been traveling for four years to high school. I got to see some of my friends in the mornings as they journeyed to high school and I to my business school. I hoped to find a job with my newly acquired skills but also felt that shorthand and typing would be assets to a college student, too.

The school met in a four-story Shamberger-owned building occupied by the school on the first floor and by apartments, including the Shamberger's own, on the other floors. All the courses were taught by Mr. and Mrs. Shamberger, who had devised the shorthand system, and the Shamberger's son.

The Shamberger shorthand system was different from the then almost universal Gregg system. It based the spelling of words on the relative position to the line to indicate the governing vowel: "a" above the line, "e" touching the line, "i" across the line, "o" touching the bottom of the line, and "u" below the line. The consonants were represented by strokes borrowed from the written letters, "d" for instance, being an arc similar to the finishing stroke of a printed capital "D." Some were not quite so obvious but were still easily learned. The art of the system was learning to indicate the word so that you could read it two days later without putting all the letters into the shorthand form. There were only a few word signs, unlike the Gregg system. The signs, both for words and for letters, were so quickly learned that we were soon able to take very slow dictation and of course gained speed as we progressed. The system is also so easy to remember that I can still use it today even though sometimes a year or so may elapse between uses. (I can read what I've written, too!) In another longer class, we learned touch typing from a chart on the board in front of us. The letter keys on our machines were masked, but the numbers were not. Consequently, I never did learn the numerals but became so proficient at identifying the proper finger for each letter that I found myself shadow-typing in my sleep, sometimes on my sister's face if she was too close to me in our shared bed. I still type out parts of conversations I hear, just as I play the hymns in church on my fingers.

One of the advertised assets of the Shamberger Business School was that all graduates were placed in jobs as soon as they completed the six-weeks course. I was very young and very shy and was grateful that I wasn't offered the first two openings for which I interviewed. One was with a formidable lawyer and the other was as receptionist in a busy office. Public relations were not high on my list of skills. The third interview was for a new small employment service in Dallas. Mr. Lewis, the "national" representative opening the office, hired the entire staff the day I applied: Vera Goodman as managing director of the office and me as receptionist/secretary. I don't know what

Vera's salary was, but mine was twenty-five dollars a month. After six weeks my pay was raised to thirty dollars, a dollar a day, in a manner of speaking.

By the time I had completed the Shamberger course and had a job at Nationwide Employment Service (a misnomer, for ours was only the third office opened), I had received a scholarship to Southern Methodist University and knew that I would be working only until school began in September. The thought of the short duration of my job and of how the pay would come in handy in starting to college made it possible for me to conquer part of the menace which faced me in the form of the telephone to answer and the empty room I presided over. At first my furniture consisted of two folding chairs and a telephone, in my front office/reception room. Vera's office had a window and opened off my domain. Fortunately, I felt comfortable with Vera from the first and, with the arrival of a desk for my phone, a typewriter, and several chairs for me and the job applicants (along with a desk and two chairs for Vera's office), I had gained some confidence about my ability to do the job. Actually, I still quail at the prospect of answering an office phone and taking messages, no matter whose office the phone is in. Vera was as new at managing an employment office as I was at my stenographic duties, so we were a good fit as we learned the ropes. I regretted that Vera seldom had to write a letter because taking dictation was the skill I was most comfortable with. I marveled at the slow pace she achieved in formulating a simple letter, but I never shared that feeling with her. She began with apparent delusions of grandeur and asked me to say she was out of the office when she was in - I guess so that she'd appear busy. I was almost incapable of that conventional fib. It caused me endless anguish and I'm sure I never lied with any appearance of telling the truth. Mr. Lewis may very well have suggested that she do so; I did hear him several times communicate his philosophy about the name of the service "Nationwide" to give the illusion of country-wide placement possibilities, for instance. I didn't have any basis for judging whether he was a good businessman or just a small-time con man. In any case, before too long Vera was able to dispense with that ruse as she got busy with her duties both in and out of the office.

My self-confidence rose somewhat as I observed the shakiness of the people who applied for work at our office. It was good to know that I was not alone in my fears. Many of the applicants tried to influence me to help them get any job which happened to be available. I thought their misconception was hilarious. As a matter of fact, we soon had many more applicants for jobs than we had jobs, since the after-effects of the depression were still apparent in Dallas. But gradually, Vera began to compile a modest catalog of available jobs. I found it pleasant to help send hopeful applicants out for possible jobs. We were successful in making a number of matches. Then, just the week before I was scheduled to leave for college, Vera was able to land an impressive vacancy and to fill it herself, leaving Mr. Lewis with the chore of returning to Dallas and beginning all over again to look for a manager and a secretary, but at least he already had a corps of applicants to choose among.