

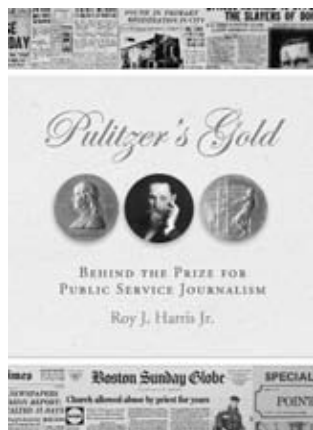
New book recounts Post's glory years

by Ted Gest

Pulitzer's Gold

Roy J. Harris, Jr.

University of Missouri Press, 2007



Those who view the 21st-century *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* as a little-recognized regional newspaper might be surprised to learn about its glory years in the national journalism spotlight, in the middle of the last century. Between 1937 and 1952, the *Post* won the coveted Pulitzer Gold Medal for public service journalism—generally considered the most prestigious of the Pulitzer Prizes—five times.

It was a record that stood for 52 years, writes Roy J.

Harris, Jr., in his new book “Pulitzer’s Gold.”

“Not counting the four war years, [the *Post*] won the Gold Medal every other year during that 15-year stretch (1937-1952),” says Harris.

Harris is well positioned to examine what makes for superior public-service journalism. In the book, he writes about the public-service prize’s evolution from 1918’s winning *New York Times* writings about World War I to 2007’s *Wall Street Journal* prize for coverage of back-dated stock options.

If the Harris name sounds familiar to those steeped in St. Louis newspaper history, it’s because author Roy J. Harris, Jr. is the son of Roy J. Harris, *Post* reporter who took part in the work that led to four of the five public-service honors. Harris, Jr. says he started the book after speaking in St. Louis in 2002, the 100th anniversary of his father’s birth, and finding that current St. Louis journalists “knew nothing ... of what the paper had done to earn those five great honors.”

That lack of knowledge, as well as ignorance about many of the 92 gold medals that have been awarded through the years, is finally remedied by Harris’s splendid volume.

Based on the yardstick of winning the gold medal, the *Post* was the “runaway choice” as the nation’s finest local newspaper staff during that 20th-century stretch of awards, Harris says.

Subjects of the winning entries were varied, ranging from local voter fraud and federal corruption to a project that helped clean St. Louis’ filthy air. The last of the five winning series, involving payoffs in federal tax collections, led to a government overhaul.

“Taxpayers have the *Post-Dispatch* to thank for [the

creation of] the Internal Revenue Service,” Harris says.

Harris gives much of the credit for starting the string of awards to *Post* Managing Editor Oliver K. Bovard and his successor, Benjamin Reese.

“Both had an almost military approach to running a newsroom, but also inspired reporters to perform at the best of their ability,” says Harris.

The staff also was inspired by the platform of newspaper founder Joseph Pulitzer, who had called on it to “always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty.”

The second Joseph Pulitzer, who headed both the newspaper and the board that awarded the Pulitzer Prizes, knew it would look bad if his own newspaper won too many of the prizes, but he still wanted the *Post* to produce journalism that could compete well nationally.

The book describes in detail how each winning project progressed, from reporter Selwyn Pepper’s spending sweltering days in the summer of 1936 to find “ghost residents” who were registered to vote to reporter Theodore Link’s probing the fixing of federal tax cases in 1951.

The elder Harris was most involved in the 1950 prize, shared with the *Chicago Daily News*, for exposing the fact that 37 Illinois newspapermen were on the public payroll. Most had “grave train” jobs like “field investigators” and “messenger clerk,” but their real function was to publish “canned editorials and news stories lauding accomplishments” of then Gov. Dwight Green. In an unusual journalistic arrangement, reporters for the two non-competing newspapers shared reporting of the corruption story.

In chronicling the Pulitzer family’s long stewardship of the prizes that bear their name, Harris, Jr. notes that after the 1952 Gold Medal, the *Post*’s “news operation entered a long Pulitzer Prize dry spell.”

The newspaper has won five prizes in the 55 years since, but all in categories other than news reporting. The most

recent prize, in 1989, actually went to furniture dealer Ron Olshwanger, whose free-lance photo of a firefighter trying to revive a child was published by the *Post*.

The best known of the public service Pulitzers since the *Post* series of wins were the 1972 *New York Times* honor for publishing the Pentagon Papers; the next year’s *Washington Post* award for covering Watergate; the 2002 *Times* designation for the post-Sept. 11, “A Nation Challenged” section; and the winning 2003 *Boston Globe* series that exposed widespread sexual abuse by Catholic priests.

As famous as these are now, Harris reminds readers

Not counting the four war years, [the *Post*] won the Gold Medal every other year during that 15-year stretch (1937-1952).

continued on page 27

sents **Loud Mouth Open MIC Night**, 8 p.m., The Mack, 4615 Macklind Ave. This live performance reading event is for writers and guests who are 21+. No charge; register to read at www.stlwritersguild.org; (314) 821-3823

St. Louis Public Library features the **Machacek Book Discussion Group**, 10 a.m., St. Louis Public Library-Machacek Branch, 6424 Scanlan Ave., (314) 781-2948

The **St. Louis Public Library-Book Discussion Group** will discuss "Dirt Music" by **Tim Winton**, 6:45 p.m., St. Louis Public Library-Kingshighway Branch, 2260 S. Vandeventer, (314) 771-5450

Wednesday, Feb. 20

The **Book Discussion Group** will be reading "Daughter of Fortune" by **Isabel Allende**, 7:30 p.m., St. Louis County Library-Florissant Valley Branch, 9195 New Florissant Rd. S., (314) 921-7200

Thursday, Feb. 21

Elizabeth McCracken, author of "Niagara Falls All Over Again," will read from her work, 1:30 p.m., Pearson House, Webster University, 8260 Big Bend, (314) 968-7170

Book Journeys will discuss "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, 2 p.m., St. Louis County Library-Indian Trails, 8400 Delpport, (314)428-5424

Friday, Feb. 22

Let's Chat Book Discussion Group will review "The Temple" by **Matt Reilly**, 2 p.m., St. Louis County Library-Daniel Boone Branch, 300 Clarkson Rd., (636) 227-9630

Saturday, Feb. 23

Write-Along Writer's Workshop will critique your writing. All writers are welcome, 11 a.m., St. Louis County Library-Indian Trails, 8400 Delpport, (314) 428-5424

The **Book Discussion Group** will discuss "The Cloud Atlas" by **Liam Callanan**. St. Louis Public Library-Buder Branch, 4401 Hampton, (314) 352-2900

Authors @ Your Library presents **Robert Bradley**, who will discuss his book "Stories about the Black Experience," St. Louis Public Library-Julia Davis Branch, 4415 Natural Bridge Ave., (314) 383-3021

Monday, Feb. 25

The **Thornbirds** will discuss

"Salem Falls" by **Jodi Picoult**, 2 p.m., St. Louis County Library-Thornhill, 12863 Willowyck Drive, (314) 878-7730

¡Leamos! Book Discussion Group will discuss "El Carterode Neruda" by **Antonio Skarmeta** (Chile), St. Louis Public Library-Carpenter Branch, 3309 S. Grand Blvd., (314) 772-6586

Tuesday, Feb. 26

As the Page Turns Book Discussion Club will meet and discuss **Tonya Bolden's** "And Not Be Afraid To Dare," 7 p.m., St. Louis County Library-Weber Road Branch, 4444 Weber Road, (314) 638-2210

The **St. Louis Poetry Center** presents Poetry @ the Point, featuring **Deborah Mashibini** and **JoyCe Blue**, (636) 225-5423, doors open at 7 p.m., reading starts at 7:30 p.m., The Focal Point, 2720 Sutton, Maplewood

Wednesday, Feb. 27

The **Central Book Discussion Group** will discuss "Death Comes for the Archbishop" by **Willa Cather**, St. Louis Public Library-Central Branch, 1301 Olive, (314) 539-0396

Radio History

Continued from page 22

for every minute of the day ("It's 12:15 at KMOX-FM."), with everything designed to make the station sound live. But it cost CBS less to pay people to record voice tracks because each jock could turn out

several shows in a short time, and they were only paid for the time spent recording. It didn't seem to bother station management that there were occasional technical miscues, causing listeners to hear the announcers introducing a song that had been heard 10 minutes before.

The end of KMOX-FM began in August 1981 when CBS began the national experiment known as "Hit Radio." The station's playlist began its transformation with more current pop hits being added, and by the end of the year the KMOX-FM call letters were dropped, replaced by KHTR. ■

Book review

Continued from page 9

that none of them was a slam-dunk. The *Times* published the Pentagon Papers over the objection of its own law firm, which warned that the paper would subject itself to criminal prosecution.

On Watergate, it's now accepted wisdom that Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's dogged reporting was a model of modern investigative reporting. At the time, however, the panel of journalists examining possibilities for the Public Service Pulitzer wanted to give it instead to a *Chicago Tribune* investigation of voting fraud, Harris writes. The higher-ranking Pulitzer Advisory Board overruled the panel, and the *Washington Post* won.

The chapter about the *New York*

Times recounts how former *Post* Reporter Gerald Boyd, who had been the *Times'* managing editor for only five days in 2001 when terrorist-controlled jetliners struck the World Trade Center, managed that week's "battlefield coverage." Harris interviewed Boyd before his death in 2006.

The priest sex abuse scandal might have never been exposed had it not been for new *Boston Globe* Editor Martin Baron's decision on his first day on the job in 2001 to put a team to work uncovering evidence that initially was sealed by judges.

Harris tells these stories and many other engrossing tales in a fine history of modern journalism that many forget about in an age of cutbacks and mergers. Harris notes, for example, that the *Arkansas Gazette's* "courageous stand" on 1957 school desegregation and the two Pulitzer Prizes that came with it "get scant mention" in the now-combined *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette's* history.

Perhaps Harris' recounting of outstanding newspaper work will inspire the *Post* and other newspapers to overcome their financial challenges and produce more work that improves public life. Harris, who is now senior editor of The Economist Group's Boston-based CFO magazine, expresses hope that "Pulitzer's Gold" "will recall the irreplaceable role of the press in American democracy." ■

Ted Gest, a former *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter and a member of *SJR's* Board of Editorial Advisers, is president of Criminal Justice Journalists based in Washington, D.C.