

S P E E D R E A D I N G

Monopoly journalism

By Dustin Beilke

The Chain Gang: One Newspaper versus the Gannett Empire

By Richard McCord
University of Missouri Press
290 pp., \$24.95

At its best, Richard McCord's *The Chain Gang* is a resounding and meticulously documented indictment of Gannett, the newspaper industry, and America's brand of corporate capitalism in general. At its worst, the book is a toothless autobiography that leaves the impression that the world would be a better place if the millionaires who run its oligarchies just weren't so darn mean all the time.

Gannett, the largest newspaper chain in the United States, accrues its enormous profits not by putting out papers that are better or more appealing to readers than those of its competitors, but by assuring that its papers "compete" in markets where they have local monopolies. This usually means buying independent, local papers that already have monopolies, or pleading poverty and entering into bogus joint-operating agreements with independent locals. But at other times it means going into cities where no paper has a monopoly and wiping out whatever competition exists.

Many media companies have followed this strategy, but none as successfully as Gannett. The company, which started in Elmira, N.Y., in 1906, grew by acquiring monopolies throughout the Northeast. In 1967 it went public, offering its shares on the New York Stock Exchange. This put the company in the hands of shareholders and securities analysts, whose first concern was not journalism but the bottom line. Over the next 10 years, Gannett grew from 28 papers in five states to 73 in 28 states, and annual revenues surged from \$185 million to \$558 million. Over the same period, earnings rose from \$15 million to \$69 million, and the price of stock went from \$9.67 to \$38 a share. As it's described in *The Chain Gang*, the company "was from its beginnings a distinctly American institution. Like the country that drove out native inhabitants from coast to coast

behind the motto 'the only good Indian is a dead Indian,' Gannett lived by the principle that the only good market is a dead market—that is, one without competition."

For Richard McCord, the story of Gannett began not in Elmira but in Salem, Ore., where the *Community Press*, a defunct weekly, sued the chain for "anti-competitive practices" in 1978. Gannett's lawyers were able to convince a judge to put a gag order on the case, meaning all documents concerning it were sealed, and all the parties involved were liable to contempt of court charges if they spoke about the case to reporters. Through his own diligence and a law clerk's incompetence, however, McCord was able to see and hand-copy all of the sealed files. McCord, who then edited the *Santa Fe Reporter*, used the information in a long feature story he wrote describing how Gannett executives deliberately plotted the destruction of the Salem weekly in what they called "Operation Demolition."

Years later McCord found himself in Green Bay, Wis., where a small, unionized daily faced an Operation Demolition of its own. Green Bay is one of a small handful of cities in the United States with two competing daily papers: Gannett owns the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, and a friend of McCord's owns the *Green Bay News-Chronicle*. McCord spent months in Green Bay writing a series of scathing articles about Gannett's activities in Green Bay and other cities. The articles provoked a popular outcry among the city's heavily working-class population and increased the *News-Chronicle's* circulation by more than 10 percent, allowing the paper to avoid near-certain bankruptcy. This story makes up the heart of *The Chain Gang*.

Scattered throughout this interesting and often inspiring tale of a small, struggling paper are innumerable personal asides and vignettes. In a chapter entitled "Whispering Miles," McCord describes what was going through his mind while driving from Santa Fe to Green Bay, and we are treated to a passage that apparently has something to do with a short-lived office romance of his: "Suddenly she was kissing me, kissing me, kissing me. And after one split second of astonishment, I was responding, responding, responding." As in Thomas Geoghegan's *Which Side Are You On?*, another indictment of American capitalism that is larded with self-indulgent autobiographical asides, these passages annoy but don't detract from the importance of the story.

Few readers of *The Chain Gang* are likely to be surprised by McCord's claims about Gannett's malevolence. What is surprising is the strength of his evidence. While many observers assume that these practices are commonplace (though McCord does not seem to be one of them), the sealed court documents McCord uncovers provide a detailed, seldom seen catalogue of corporate dirty tricks. Seeing these methods revealed in all their ugliness should infuriate anyone who is already angry that cities that once had three, four or more independent daily papers now have only one. ◀

Dustin Beilke is a freelance writer based in Madison, Wis.

C L A S S I F I E D S

► HELP WANTED

PROGRESSIVE STATEWIDE LABOR UNION is filling two positions: **COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR** - Requires experience in all aspects of external public relations and internal membership communications. Duties include: handling all media relations; developing strategy and materials for union organizing drives; preparation of brochures, reports and speeches. Must have strong writing skills, excellent strategic ability and good organizational skills. Desktop publishing ability desirable.

REALITY TOUR OF CHIAPAS
See alternative trade in practice. Visit coffee & crafts coops and talk to farmers, weavers and human rights workers. Jan. 19-26 & monthly trips.
GLOBAL EXCHANGE 800-497-1994.

JEWISH CURRENTS

October, 1996 Issue
"Netanyahu Subverts Peace Process," "Assessing the Elections," editorials; "On Painting an American Jewish Picture," Ken Apteckar; "The Tom Bird Controversy," George Jochnowitz; "Why and How Labor Lost," Ralph Seliger.

Single issue: \$3 (USA).
Subscription: \$30 yearly (USA).

JEWISH CURRENTS
Dept. T, Suite 601,
22 E. 17 St., New York, NY 10003.

POLICY DIRECTOR - Requires experience in labor or public policy analysis. Duties include: policy development; development of strategic campaigns to advance policy objectives; membership education on policy issues; liaison with other organizations. Must have strong writing, speaking and organizational skills. Applicants should have labor union experience or knowledge. Competitive salary and excellent benefits. Send résumé to: Minnie Perez, AFSCME Council 31, 29 N. Wacker Dr. #800, Chicago, IL 60606.

COMMUNITY JOBS: The Employment Newspaper for the Non-Profit Sector. Join over 50,000 job-seekers

New Political Science

Radical scholarship on today's political issues.
Special price! \$25 for 4 issues

Cvt Dpt., Suffolk Univ.,
Boston, MA 02108
617-573-8126

in reading a unique monthly publication containing more than 200 new job listings (in Environment, Arts, International, Health, Youth, Civil Rights, Housing, Human Services, etc.). Featuring informative articles, book reviews, resource lists, profiles of nonprofit organizations and the people who found them. Contact: Community Jobs, 1001 Connecticut Ave. NW, Ste. 838, Wash., DC 20036.

RECRUITMENT DIRECTOR--The AFL-CIO Organizing Institute is looking for an experienced organizer to direct campus recruitment and other special recruitment projects. Union organizing and supervisory experience required. DC-based, with trav-

Socialist

A democratic socialist view of life and politics from the Socialist Party USA.
\$9.00 per year (6 issues).

516 W. 25th St. #404, NY, NY 10001
(212) 691-0776

Thomas Paine VIDEOCASSETTE

This educational, "very informative," and "fascinating" 40-minute video, written and hosted by Thomas Paine Scholar Carl Shapiro, was telecast via cable TV throughout northern New Jersey in the spring of 1992. In this original, unedited video, the essential meaning of Paine's extraordinary career as revolutionary writer and foremost exponent of democratic principles is recounted in a presentation "sure in its content" and clear in its delivery. A discussion of little-known but significant incidents in Paine's life adds immeasurably to this memorable video.

VHS cassette, \$25.00 ppd. (USA)
INDEPENDENT PUBLICATIONS, P.O. BOX 102, RIDGEFIELD, NJ 07657

el. Call for a complete job description: 202-408-0700. Résumé and cover letter to Selection Committee, AFL-CIO Organizing Institute, 1101 Fourteenth St. NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20005.

SENIOR ORGANIZER--The AFL-CIO Organizing Department is looking for an experienced organizer to work with union leaders and key staff to develop effective organizing programs. Union organizing and supervisory experience required. Travel. Call for a complete job description: 202-639-6204. Résumé and cover letter to Selection Committee, AFL-CIO Organizing Department, 815 Sixteenth St. NW, Washington, DC 20006.

IN THESE TIMES seeks volunteer interns with an interest in progressive politics and independent publishing to do research, proofreading and other editorial tasks. Send résumé and cover letter to Deidre McFadyen, ITT, 2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647.

► PUBLICATIONS

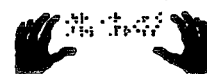
DO YOU HAVE spanking fantasies? We do--hundreds--and ours are for sale. Romantic, erotic, disciplinary, wherever the muse wanders. For a 24-page catalogue send \$3.00 to CF Publications, Box 706TT, E. Setauket, NY.

GOOD VIBRATIONS



Friendly, Informative catalogs of sex toys, books & videos, \$4.
1210 Valencia #117
San Francisco, CA 94110

Our Right To Know Braille Press, Inc.



For blind and print-handicapped persons, **FII-FREEDOM IDEAS INTERNATIONAL**, a quarterly review of minority and independent publications, includes selected articles from **IN THESE TIMES**. Produced by Our Right to Know Braille Press, Inc., on 4-track 15/16 ips cassette tape.

A 4-issue subscription costs \$5.

Our Right to Know Braille Press, Inc.
640 Bayside, Detroit, MI 48217
(313) 842-1804