

## THE DREAM MERCHANT

We use the term "The American Dream" rather casually in this country and maybe it's important to define what it means to most of us. Generally, it's used in a context which asserts that the United States is a place where anyone, no matter what his origins or how rich or poor he may be can rise to fame and fortune. It's possible to do that in other countries, too, of course, but to the average American, the rise from obscurity to prominence is the special virtue of his country.

During the tremendous 19th century expansion of this country, every fresh immigrant from Ireland or Germany or elsewhere took it as gospel that the United States was a country where rigid social and economic structures of older societies did not rule and where a humble immigrant could rise from poverty to wealth and position. To these new citizens, the "American Dream" was economic and social dogma.

Surprisingly, the "American Dream" remained intact into the 20th century and reached its zenith during the stock market boom of the Twenties. It seemed to die with the 1929 market crash, but revived in the boom years after World War II. You can argue that the "American Dream" is no longer a viable concept in the 21st century. I suppose you could even argue that it never existed at all but was simply a delusion that was so strongly held that no one dared question it. Nevertheless, the "American Dream" as a concept, was one of the pillars of our nation during its formative years and its preeminent salesman was an unlikely author bearing the equally unlikely name of Horatio Alger, Jr.

I'm sure that name is familiar to most of you although you may not be as familiar with what he did and when he lived. Briefly, he was a prolific American author of boy's books in the latter half of the 19th century. I was introduced to his books around the age of 12 by my grandmother. She had a cache of my father's boyhood books locked up in a cabinet in her sewing room and gave me access to them when she perceived I could be trusted to treat them with the same care as she had. There were seven or eight books by Alger in the collection bearing titles

such as "Luck and Pluck", "Sink or Swim", "Tattered Tom", "Strive and Succeed" and "Try and Trust". I dove into them with enthusiasm.

They weren't hard reading for someone my age and I thought they were pretty good. (How many boys of 12 have taken a comparative lit course, after all?) In the 70 years since then, I suppose, I've acquired enough worldly wisdom to dismiss them as merely by-products of a simpler time. But were they? And what of the author and what led him to write these books? I'll try to enlighten you on these questions and others, but I must preface my remarks with the story of a rather incredible literary hoax that frustrates any attempt to treat Alger's life accurately.

Alger was an intensely private man who shunned publicity his entire life. He left behind at his death no personal papers or diaries -fodder for biographic researchers to sort through -and instructed his heirs to avoid answering questions about his private affairs. This was a needless instruction at the time of his death because no one cared. But, in the 1920's, when the significance of Alger's books had undergone a critical renaissance, the lack of material about his life became a barrier to those attempting to chronicle it.

Into this breach stepped a young journalist named Herbert R. Mayes, who would later become editor of GOOD HOUSEKEEPING magazine, a director of the SATURDAY REVIEW and president of the McCall Publishing Company. In 1927 he contracted to write the first full-length biography of Alger, but after a few weeks of coming up dry in his research, he decided it was an impossible task. A friend suggested a new approach -do a fictional biography of Alger, a parody. The idea appealed to Mayes and he began to fabricate a life story out of his own fertile imagination.

He had a few facts to build around and supplemented these by quotes from Alger's diary - which apparently never existed -and by excerpts from letters both to and from Alger which were wholly inventions of Mayes himself. He considered apparently that he was writing a "spoof" which would be instantly recognizable as such by anyone who read the book. When finally published under the title: "Alger: A Biography Without a Hero", reviews were mixed. They ranged from "Don't miss it!" to "The author has let a second-rate vocabulary and a fifth-rate imagination loose

on the few known facts about Alger's life". But, none of the critics questioned the reliability of Mayes' work.

To his dismay, the book became the primary source for Alger's life in the *DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY* and for the next 45 years was never seriously questioned. Other biographers cited the book as gospel and embellished its tales with fabrications of their own. Finally, in 1973, Mayes -perhaps for reasons of conscience -confessed that his book had been "a complete fabrication, with virtually no scintilla of baSis in fact. Any word of truth in it got in unwittingly. I made it up out of nothing". This bizarre hoax was not rectified until 1985, when two academicians, Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales, collaborated on a book entitled "The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr." It was based on several years of painstaking research and is considered to be as accurate a biography as could have been written about this very private man. My account is based on their work. The place to gain an understanding of Horatio Alger, Jr., is with his family and his childhood. He was born on Friday, the 13th of January, 1832. 1832 was 100 years after the birth of George Washington and only 33 years after his death. The United States was still an emerging nation - seeking a place among the nations of the world, several of whom had designs on this new-world upstart.

As you might guess, young Horatio's father was named Horatio Alger, Sr. and he was the Harvard-educated pastor of the First Unitarian Church of Chelsea, Massachusetts. The Alger's were a proud New England family. One of their early ancestors was John Rogers, the first Protestant martyr burned at the stake by Bloody Mary in 1555. A number of the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth in 1820 were Alger forebears, as were numerous ancestors who had fought in the American Revolution on the Colonial side. Quite naturally, these were things which vested a family with a certain self-importance as to their place in the world and Senior took it all very seriously.

Horatio, Jr. was the eldest of Senior's five children. He was a frail baby and slow to develop due to frequent bouts with respiratory ailments. At the age of two he was diagnosed with asthma. Reportedly, he suffered from a stammering problem and was quite shy as a youngster. His early

schooling was by his parents at home, but he finally entered the local grammar school in Chelsea when he was ten years old. He was undersized and the target of much teasing by the other boys, but it also became apparent that he was far and away the most gifted academically.

Money was always a problem in the Alger household, due largely to Senior's meager salary. It was perhaps a blessing when, in 1844, he accepted a call from a church in Marlborough, Massachusetts. There was in Marlborough a private school named Gates Academy which was designed for those students who wished to extend their education beyond grammar school. The school had an outstanding headmaster named Obadiah Albee, and his influence on the young Horatio was both immediate and lifechanging. He succeeded in helping the young man speak without stammering and gave him the confidence to engage in classroom discussions with both his teachers and his fellow students. Most importantly, perhaps, the headmaster cultivated a skill which young Horatio had begun to evince -creative writing. Mr. Albee encouraged his efforts in writing both poetry and prose and was able to get some of his poems published by the local newspaper -a real shot in the arm for his confidence, of course.

When, at the age of 16, he entered Harvard, Junior truly had come a long way after an unpromising start. Harvard loosened him up -quite possibly because he was not under the stern eye of his father. He completed his four-year course in 1852, standing 8th in his class of 88 and being elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He won a prize for Greek prose and was elected "Class Odist". This latter honor meant that he had to write verses to the traditional tune of "Fair Harvard" which were sung by his classmates at Class Day exercises. Junior was popular and well-liked by his classmates and actually did some things that college boys do. For example, he was one of the founding members of the Alpha Chapter of Psi Upsilon, one of the early social fraternities at Harvard. The capper came in his senior year when he was officially admonished by the Administration for excessive unexcused absences from morning prayers. He seemed to be turning into a real human being!

In spite of this shocking behavior over the morning prayer issue, he did graduate. The rest of his life seemed predictable and preordained -at least to Alger Senior. It would proceed from Divinity

School to a small New England pastorate, to a wife and family, to increasingly larger pastorates and maybe to authorship of a few stories having moral significance to feed Junior's penchant for writing. But it didn't happen that way. Junior had planned to enter Divinity School in the Fall, but dithered around with part-time jobs until the entry date had passed. With great trepidation he told his father that he wished to try a career as a writer and, somewhat surprisingly, Senior suggested he try it for a year and, if it didn't work out, then go to divinity school. Junior got a job as an Assistant Editor at a Boston newspaper and tried writing on the side, but quit the paper after six months, saying: "I don't think I was adapted for newspaper work", and returned to the Divinity School.

But, to his father's dismay, the drive to write had not gone away and young Horatio dropped out in a few weeks and vowed to try his writing career once again. This time he took a job at a boys' school in Rhode Island to pay the rent while he sought to get his material published. For three years he wrote almost constantly and actually had a little success. He gradually switched from poetry to prose and acquired enough of a reputation that publishers no longer slammed the door in his face. He even sold some of his stories for as much as \$5.00, a pretty good price among the magazines of that day. But by mid-1857, it became clear to him that his income was neither reliable nor substantial and was not likely to be so long as his writing was merely a side-line venture. He needed a firmer base for his support during this apprentice period of his writing career and apparently decided it could best be found in the ministry. Accordingly, he entered Harvard Divinity School in the fall of 1857 and, after 3 undistinguished years, graduated in 1860.

Graduation apparently came as something of a relief and to celebrate Alger took a small inheritance he had received and with a Divinity School classmate and a 19 year-old cousin left on a tour of Europe which lasted almost 9 months. Before leaving, Alger had arranged with the New York SUN to write letters home about his travels and his observations of European society. He billed himself as a "foreign correspondent for a major metropolitan daily", which apparently opened some doors for interviews but, in the main, the letters are primarily concerned with his often-perceptive observations of the people and their customs in the cities the little group visited. I found them quite interesting.

The Civil War had begun by the time of Alger's return to the U.S. He did not enlist immediately, as many others did, but was drafted in 1863 and promptly rejected for medical reasons. He was myopic and at 5' 2" tall was two inches below the minimum height requirement for military service.

Alger had never stopped his writing through this period of his life and was enjoying more critical success with each passing year. His work began to appear in prestigious periodicals such as HARPER'S MAGAZINE, PUTNAM'S MAGAZINE and even the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW. But he was paid next to nothing for his contributions and had to resort to private tutoring in order to pay his bills. In early 1864, after a string of failures in writing, he had an epiphany. He decided that he would no longer pursue the dream of literary distinction, but would in his words "devote myself to a humbler department which would pay me better." He decided to write for children.

He immediately contacted a publisher of juvenile books in New York named Aaron Loring who had a stable of writers of books for children, among them Louisa May Alcott. Loring was looking for some good adventure books for boys and expressed interest in one whose plot was outlined for him by Alger. Three months later, the book, called "Frank's Campaign", was finished. It involved a story about a teen-aged boy who stayed home to look after his mother and sister and the family farm while his father was away in the army. The boy organizes a "junior army" of his juvenile friends and they devote themselves to showing how boys on the home front could be most effective in helping to win the war. The book was written in haste and showed it. Nevertheless, it was well-received and went into a second printing. Alger got a royalty of five cents per copy and considered the book his first major literary effort. He also concluded that writing for children could be rewarding.

But, at the same time in 1864 that Alger was despairing of his writing career, he hedged his bets by accepting a call from the First Unitarian Church of Brewster, Massachusetts. Following an audition sermon in October, he was invited to be their minister at a salary of \$800 per year. For several months Alger performed his duties well, and even found time to write a second novel for his

publisher, Loring. But his good fortune had run its course.

Early in 1866, rumors began to circulate about Alger's sexual misconduct with boys in his congregation. A committee was appointed to investigate the rumors and quickly established that they were true. When they confronted Alger, he neither denied the charges nor offered anything in extenuation. He calmly admitted that he had been imprudent and left town hastily on the next train. The congregation considered filing criminal charges against Alger, but opted instead for a full report of his conduct to the church headquarters in Boston. Fortunately for Alger, the church executive was a close friend of his father and acceded to the latter's pleadings that the rest of his son's life not be destroyed by disclosure of the Brewster events. Alger agreed to leave the ministry forever and the matter was quietly closed. The fear that it would one day re-surface dogged Alger the rest of his life, however, and probably motivated the destruction of his private papers at the time of his death.

For Alger, a Rubicon had been crossed. For the first time in his life, he was going to have to rely on his writing to support himself. He wasted no time in getting started and left for New York in April, 1866. He was to spend the next 30 years there. For a time, he was able to survive by recycling some of the stories he had written for magazines in previous years, but he soon realized that more would be required if he was to continue a writing career.

Changing the direction of his career to write adventure stories for boys had been suggested by his publisher and Alger decided to follow his advice. It was a fortuitous decision because New York City in the years following the Civil War seemed to be overrun with homeless teen-aged boys. It's unclear where they came from. A few had actually been in the Union Army as drummer boys, but most of these street urchins had either been dispossessed by their families or had run away from home. Some of them were immigrant boys, but more about that later.

These boys were literally "street people" in the true sense of the word. They gravitated to such work as bootblacks, newsboys, busboys and whatever other menial tasks they could find. Their homes were in cellars of deserted houses, doorways and any other place where they could find a modicum of shelter and warmth. Alger saw in them the material for his stories and

experienced his first and greatest publishing success with a book entitled: "Ragged Dick"; or "Street Life in New York with the Bootblacks". It was an instant hit, although it's difficult to determine why that should be. Possibly it was because Alger depicted a hero who was considerably less than perfect. Dick smoked cigars, for example, but was so fastidious about doing so that he avoided smoking the cheapest ones. (Alger threw in here the statement that no 14-year old boy could smoke without injuring himself. Later generations ridiculed this advice but it turned out that Alger was right after all.) Dick also lost much of his meager earnings at a gambling house where he and his fellow "juvenile gangsters" drank vile gin at 2 cents a glass. The fact that Dick had these character flaws made his story even more compelling to young readers who must have thought that if Dick could overcome them and rise to success (as he ultimately did) they were a cinch to do so.

But, while Dick had minor character flaws, he also had some strong virtues. He was hard-working and honest and never abused or took advantage of his fellow boot-blacks, especially the younger ones who considered him a role model. One day, a merchant who knew Dick asked him to guide his nephew around New York City; in exchange for this, Dick was promised a new suit of clothes. The nephew, Frank, exposes Dick to some refined behavior during their tour, and the latter resolves to try to become, as he puts it, "'spectable". He rents a room in a nearby boardinghouse and opens a savings account. Over the next nine months, Dick slowly but surely abandons his bad habits and strives to improve his life. He learns to read and write and do basic arithmetic. Finally, while crossing on the Brooklyn Ferry, he rescues a child who had fallen overboard. The child's father rewards him with a job in his business and in the final paragraphs of the story "Ragged Dick" becomes Richard Hunter, Esq., "a young gentleman on the way to fame and fortune".

"Ragged Dick" was first serialized in twelve installments in a juvenile magazine and received much acclaim from critics who thought it to be an uplifting story for boys. Its favorable reception resulted in publication in book form. It was the most popular novel Alger ever wrote and remained in print for over 40 years. He could not have guessed that at age 35, he had written his best book for

boys and would spend the rest of his life trying to surpass it by using the same stale formula: A poor hero rises from rags to respectability by hard work and virtue, which is recognized and rewarded by a benevolent adult. He wrote dozens of novels with this theme in succeeding years, seemingly wedded to the same basic plot and character types. Between 1867 and 1873, for example, he wrote eighteen of these juvenile stories -an average of almost three per year. Critics turned on Alger with outright hostility, but the books generally sold well. This was possibly because parents considered them a preferred alternative to dime novels and other forms of juvenile literature of the day.

In addition to relieving financial pressure on Alger and establishing his reputation within the publishing industry, "Ragged Dick" indirectly influenced the course of most of the rest of his life. The book prompted a plea for help from a home which private citizens had founded called "The Newsboys Lodging House" on Fulton Street in the Bowery. This shelter, as we would call it today, could accommodate 140 of these street boys who paid five cents a night for a bed and a locker, plus an additional five cents if they wished to buy breakfast. Alger became fascinated by this shelter, or "The Lodge" as the boys called it, and began spending more and more time at it, talking with the boys and getting their stories. The Superintendent of The Lodge, a man named O'Connor, became a close friend and provided Alger with a spartan room where he could write. He also enlisted Alger's aid in setting up a small library for those boys who could read. Alger aided in fund-raising efforts for the Lodge and gave generously himself in its support. The boys trusted this funny little man who wasn't much bigger than they were and their experiences provided fodder for many of Alger's stories.

I can't leave this episode of Alger's ties to The Newsboys Lodging House without raising an issue which you're probably thinking about. In our more sophisticated times, a man who did these things would probably be suspected of homosexual activities -and it's possible there were some, I suppose. On the other hand, no such activities were ever reported and we must conclude that while Alger put himself in a position of suspicion, the most he was guilty of was indiscretion. His life is testament to the fact that he genuinely liked boys and had abundant sympathy for their hopes and aspirations. The boys he wrote for seemed to understand this and that may account for his popularity

among them.

His humanitarian instincts for homeless boys were particularly aroused by what was called "the Padrone system". This was a despicable exploitation of young boys by Italian criminals who literally bought these boys from their parents in Italy, exported them to New York, taught them to play harps or violins, and then sent them onto the streets to play and beg. The padrone, or master, took all the money they made and beat them if they didn't produce enough.

Alger didn't initiate the crusade against this practice, but because he was considered an "expert" on street life in New York, he was recruited to join it. He concluded that he could be of most help to the crusade by writing a novel about the young street musicians. This he did in the record time (even for him) of three weeks. He called it "Phil, the Fiddler" and hoped its effects would be like "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in the sense of effecting social change for these boys. Unfortunately, his hopes were unrealized. The book did not sell well and was ignored completely by the New York dailies. The padrone system continued for years.

Alger had taught previously at a boys' school and another opportunity to teach arose in 1869 when he was offered a job of tutoring the five sons of Joseph Seligman, one of the richest men in America and founder of the international banking house of J. & W. Seligman Co.. Income from his books was down and the money from Seligman was most welcome. Alger lived at the Seligman mansion on 34th Street -site of the future Empire State Building -and performed his duties admirably. All five of the Seligman sons earned their degrees and went on to successful careers. Alger stayed seven years with the Seligman family and remained friends with them the rest of his life.

Faced with the declining sales of his "boot-black" novels, Alger, in the late 1870's, realized he needed a new setting for his stories and turned to the "Wild West" for his plots and characters. He was not alone in doing this and western stories by many of the dime novelists of the day were enjoying tremendous popular success. Alger made a trip to California lasting several weeks to collect local color for his stories and soon after wrote one called "Joe's Luck". It featured Indian warfare,

some killing by California desperadoes and other sensationalism -a substantial departure from the genteel behavior of his earlier works. But, this western strategy backfired amidst a storm of criticism about boys' books that featured "fighting, killing and thrilling adventures". Alger's books took the brunt of this criticism and from this time until the 1920's public librarians embarked on an anti-Alger crusade. Many took his books from the shelves or issued them only to adults. Sales dropped to the point that his long-time publisher was forced into bankruptcy.

This failure of his Western stories marked the twilight of Alger's already rather pedestrian career as a writer. He realized that his traditional format had outlived its time and turned his efforts to writing biographies of American heroes for juvenile consumption. The first one about the recently assassinated President Garfield enjoyed some commercial success, but the succeeding two about Daniel Webster and President Lincoln did not and Alger abandoned the effort.

Alger had never owned a home and his years in New York -apart from his seven years at the Seligmans -were spent in rooming houses. As his writing career diminished, his asthmatic lungs gave him increasing trouble in New York's polluted air and he became lonely and depressed. He left the city permanently in 1896 and went to live with his sister, Augusta, in South Natick, Massachusetts. He died there of heart disease on July 18, 1899, and his remains were cremated before burial. As noted earlier, all of his personal writings and correspondence were destroyed by his sister.

This should have consigned Alger to the oblivion he appeared to seek all his life. But, a funny thing happened on the road to oblivion. Alger had never been what could be called a "popular" writer. A few months before his death, he estimated that he had sold about 800,000 books in his lifetime and had earned from them about \$100,000. But, shortly after the turn of the century, his books began to be reissued in cheap editions and his popularity soared. (These were the books in my father's collection.) By 1910, these reprints had estimated sales of over a million copies a year more than had been sold during Alger's entire lifetime. What caused this posthumous explosion? Stated most simply, Alger came to be regarded as the symbol of American success and the "poster-boy" for business enterprise. The melodramatic stories he wrote for boys in the 19th century were elevated

into the fiction that moral heroism inevitably equates with economic success. The stock heroes of Alger's books were reinvented as the great captains of American industry who overcame every hurdle on their way to economic triumph. The wide discrepancy between what Alger wrote and what he is popularly believed to have written increased during the 20th century. As long ago as 1945, one of his early biographers noted: "The Alger hero was a poor boy who rose to middle-class respectability as a reward *for* his filial piety, not a poor boy who became a millionaire by dint of honesty and hard work". Yet, this discrepancy was to continue and increase even as his books went out of print. His canonization as an American success myth maker even persisted during the Great Depression and World War II and Alger was transformed into a patriotic defender of those qualities typified by the Alger hero.

In 1947, the ultimate irony of the Alger myth was institutionalized by the American Schools and Colleges Association through its establishment of the "Horatio Alger Awards". Each year, these awards recognize "living individuals who by their own efforts had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps in the American tradition". Past recipients have included presidents Eisenhower and Reagan and Billy Graham.

Alger can't be blamed for his mutation from didactic novelist for boys to an economic and political symbol of the American Dream. He probably would have been the first to protest it. He would, I think, be satisfied with the legacy of having favorably influenced several generations of American boys and, if my own experience is relevant, by doing the same for many of their descendants.

ROBERT J. WATKINS The Literary Club January 14, 2013