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# Blackwell's Almanac

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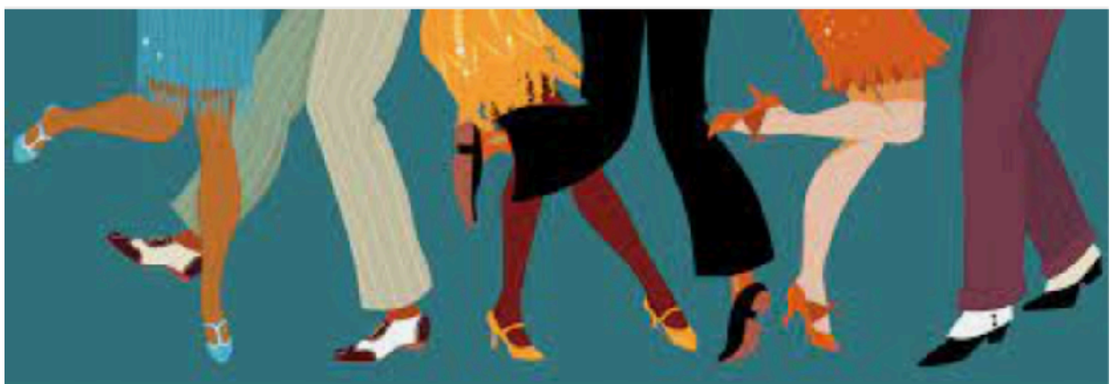

*Jazz, the Charleston, flappers, prohibition and a lot more. See "Old New York: Part VIII—The Roaring '20s," p. 2. Images: All Occasions Catering, Mona Butler–Medium.*

# Old New York:
# Part VIII—The Roaring '20s

**Contents**

P. 2 Old New York: Part VIII—The Roaring '20s

P. 6 Backstage at Radio City Music Hall, Part 2, by Dean Irwin

P. 11 Back Number Budd

Blackwell's Almanac

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As the ravages of World War I and the flu pandemic receded into the past, a new spirit gripped New York City. Energy seemed to infuse every aspect of city life, from business to leisure and everything in between. For a decade, New Yorkers by and large lived, worked and partied with abandon.

The engine that ignited the city's swinging style was its economic expansion. While the nation itself, over the course of the 1920s, boasted an increase in gross national product of some 40% and a doubling of its total wealth, New York claimed even more than its share. The city was one of the largest manufacturing hubs, producing one twelfth of the country's entire factory output. Its harbors received thousands of ships every year and its more than 200 shipping companies dispatched almost half of America's international maritime trade. The result was a stunning increase in standard of living for those who were employed, which swept many into an affluent culture of consumerism.

**Immigration, Migration and the Harlem Renaissance**

By 1920, over a century of immigration had created the "melting pot" of nationalities for which New York has come to be known. But concerns about job competition and plain ethnic prejudice prompted the passage of two exclusionary laws. The Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 banned Asians entirely and established stringent quotas for certain other ethnic groups, particularly Southern and Eastern Europeans. Northern Europeans were still welcomed, however, and because a number of West Indian islands were British colonies, Jamaicans and other West Indians were able to come in droves to the city. Added to this group, that ultimately made up 25% of Harlem's population, was the river of humanity that flowed into that growing neighborhood as a result of the Great Migration. Labor shortages in the North sent recruiters to the South to find African American hires. Others came simply for the promise of a more equitable life. The resulting mix blossomed into the Harlem Renaissance.

*Bandleader and composer Duke Ellington got his start at the Cotton Club. He wrote over one thousand compositions, many of which are still standards today. Image: studentsofhistory.com.*

Writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, actor/singer Paul Robeson, activist Marcus Garvey, and visual artist Aaron Douglas all made their mark. But more than anything else, jazz emanating from Harlem was the hallmark of the age. Musicians like bandleader Fletcher Henderson, composer and bandleader Duke Ellington, pianist Jelly Roll Morton and singer/trumpeter Louis Armstrong made jazz the sound of the city. Whether recordings, radio broadcasts or live performances at venues such as the Savoy and the Cotton Club, New Yorkers—white and black—couldn't get enough. Nor could they sit sedately by and just listen: dance floors and living rooms shook with the vibes of the Charleston, the cake walk, the black bottom and the flea hop.

*The raging success of the first "talkie" ushered in an unending love affair with Hollywood and the movies. Image: xroads.virginia.edu.*

**Other "Jazz Age" Entertainments**
The very first radio broadcast in the country—over Pittsburgh's KDKA—took place in 1920. Three years later there were more than 500 radio stations, including in New York. By the end of the decade, radios and radio programming in the city—music, dramas, presidential addresses—had become commonplace. And the place to buy your radio was Radio Row, a warehouse district centered around Cortlandt Street on the lower west side of Manhattan.

New Yorkers also loved the movies. This passion was reinforced in 1927 by the introduction of the first "talkie," "The Jazz Singer" with Al Jolson, in the Warner Theater in Times Square. Movie-going soon became a once-a-week indulgence for many (at 20¢ a ticket), lured by such stars as Charlie Chaplin, Gloria Swanson, Rudolph Valentino and Tallulah Bankhead.

For New York City, the '20s saw a sea change in organized sports. Yankee Stadium opened in 1923 and the heroic performance of Babe Ruth drew record attendance throughout the decade. Professional boxing was legalized in 1920. This soon produced the likes of Jack Dempsey, who proceeded to fill Madison Square Garden with ardent fans, not just from the working class, but from all strata of society.

**Prohibition**
The 18th Amendment to the Constitution banned the manufacture and sale of alcohol and, in accordance with the Volstead Act, at 12:00 am on January 17, 1920, every tavern, bar and saloon in the country was closed. The law did not, however, regulate the <u>consumption</u> of liquor. Many people made "moonshine" or "bathtub gin" for their own use or stockpiled a supply before the law took effect. In fact, the conventional wisdom suggested that New York's Yale Club had a 14-year supply of booze in its basement.

THE AMERICAN ISSUE

U.S. IS VOTED DRY

36th STATE RATIFIES DRY AMENDMENT JAN. 16

Nebraska Noses Out Missouri for Honor of Completing Job of Writing Dry Act Into the Constitution; Wyoming, Wisconsin and Minnesota Right on Their Heels

*At midnight the country allegedly ceased the sale of alcohol. Image: timetoast.com*

Looking back, the statute seemed to spawn another law—the law of unintended consequences. By forcing the liquor trade underground, Prohibition (1920–1933) gave rise to "bootlegging" (the illegal manufacture and sale of alcohol) and its accompanying organized crime and gang violence, as personified by Chicago crime boss Al Capone and New York's Dutch Schultz. It also was responsible for the proliferation of "speakeasies," which, in a perverse way, just seemed to add to the spirit of high jinx and festivity that characterized the era.

**"Flappers" or the Modern Woman**

No image of the period is more iconic than the "flapper," a young lady sporting short skirts, bobbed hair and flashy hair bands, who smoked, drank, danced somewhat provocatively and delighted in "unladylike" utterances. This was, perhaps, the outward manifestation of women's newly won freedoms.

*"Flappers" challenged women's traditional behavior and societal roles. Image: en.wikipedia.org.*

Electricity now being widespread, new technologies such as the washing machine, the freezer and the vacuum cleaner released women from much of the drudgery of housework. This is turn permitted them to enter the labor market and, with the independence conferred by a salary, allowed them to participate in the expansive consumer culture. Increased sexual freedom was also in the air. The greater availability of birth control devices such as the diaphragm no doubt relieved some of the worry and strictures surrounding sex. And the automobile, called by some "a bedroom on wheels," provided young New Yorkers with the freedom to travel where they wanted and to do what they pleased.

Last, but certainly not least, women got the vote. They had had it in New York State elections since 1917. But in 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution empowered women to shape our federal government with the very same impact as men.

**Not Everything Was Good**

The 1920s in New York was an era of contradictions. While much of the population prospered at levels unseen before, many industrial workers suffered. Ironically, the Great (Black) Migration, encouraged by Northerners to correct a labor shortage, ended up creating a labor oversupply. This was exacerbated by the population redistribution from farms to cities like New York and the displacement of both skilled and unskilled jobs with machinery. Unemployment hovered at 7%, fomenting job insecurity and little improvement in wages or working conditions.

The flu pandemic that had killed 30,000 New Yorkers was over. And the epidemic illnesses that had raged through the city before the universal supply of fresh water and the removal of trash and sewage were also gone. But tuberculosis still haunted the city. Despite public health efforts and special clinics, in the absence of antibiotics, it still managed to kill almost 4,600 New Yorkers a year.

Cars were said to be the most important product of the 1920s. Low prices and generous credit conspired to put more than half a million new automobiles on the streets of the city—luxuries, perhaps, in 1920, but life necessities by 1929. Nevertheless, there was precious little new highway or road

*A 1925 Ford Model T Touring Car. For most of the 1920s, Henry Ford's Model T dominated the road. From 1920 through 1926, it accounted for 47 percent of new-car sales. In 1921, it represented an astonishing 61 percent. Image: en.wikipedia.org.*

construction within the city. The result was a New York choked with traffic and mired in a transportation nightmare.

And then there was the stock market. According to Federal Reserve historians, "The Roaring Twenties roared loudest and longest on the New York Stock Exchange." Between August 1921 and September 1929, the Dow Jones Industrial Average rose from 63 to an unprecedented 6 times multiple of 381. Then, on October 28, 1929, it fell… disastrously, by 13%. The "crash," as it was called, ultimately ushered in the Great Depression.

The Roaring Twenties ended with a whimper. The prosperity, the fun, the noise wound down, much like the music on those early hand-cranked record players that slowed and deepened to a dirge as the crank played out.

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# Backstage at Radio City Music Hall

## Part 2

## by Dean Irwin

*Our February issue debuted Irwin's personal narrative of growing up behind the scenes at the famous music hall, where his father was Musical Director. The biggest indoor theater in the world, seating an audience of over 6,000, the hall alternated a new stage show with a first-run movie premiere four times a day, seven days a week. Irwin was fascinated by the personalities, the backstage mechanics and the effort it took to mount the regularly changing stage spectacular. So much so, that at one point in his working career, he took over as summer relief stage manager.*

The Music Hall had its own cafeteria, its own hospital, its own daytime dormitories. There were vast rooms in the basement where sets for the next show were built, rehearsal halls on the top floors where the orchestra, dancers and singers could work out their routines. Dress rehearsals took place at 5am, hours before the theater opened for the run of a new movie and a new show.

Stagehands had been up all night, taking down the old scenery and putting up new sets. It was known as "working the change." Many of the staff had been with each other not just for weeks or years but for decades, longer than the longest running Broadway show. Everyone referred to the theater simply as "The Hall."

By the time I entered high school, my dad had become Musical Director of Radio City and I could travel to 50th Street by myself on a Friday afternoon. I'd arrive before the third show and watch it out front with the audience. Sometimes I'd spot Mr. Valentino, a white-haired gentleman who sat in the first row on the left almost every day, although he usually attended a first or second show. Some of the Rockettes would recognize him and give him a wink.

My dad and I would have dinner together and I'd tell him how school

was going. He'd describe his latest challenge, such as finding 18 performers who could sing and ice skate at the same time, replacing a Dutch troupe who had suddenly quit because producer Leonidoff had promised them a deluxe hotel and put them up in a fleabag instead. There was a teeter-board act, two men who juggled Indian clubs while balancing on a board and roller, who'd fallen down because one of the assistant conductors played their music too slowly. They had ducked under the curtain as it fell, screaming "Assassino! Assassino!" ("assassin").

This unfortunate conductor also happened to be on the podium during a show that required a band car move, where the big wooden platform that held the orchestra rolled on metal tracks from the front to the back of the stage. But one of the wheels rolled over the power cable, stopping the orchestra in the middle of the stage.

Frozen in the lights, the orchestra had to repeat the "Rakoczy March" four times before a new cable could be spliced, causing backstage wits to joke that it was the only time this particular conductor had ever been asked to play an encore. Nobody got hurt, which was always the main thing.

After dinner, we'd return to my dad's office, now a much larger space with a grand piano, where he'd change into his tux for the last show. Everybody knew me because I'd grown up in the place, so I got to watch from the wings backstage. I'd watch the Rockettes clickity-clack in their tap shoes, forming up on either side of the stage to make their entrance. There might be an acrobat on a ladder who balanced a sword on the point of a dagger held in his mouth, followed by my dad's choir driving Chevrolet convertibles on stage to sing "New York, New York, it's a helluva town…"

Every stage presentation at the Music Hall was a variety show, following the formula that movie palace innovator Roxy Rothafel had offered in the 1920's. They started with something cultural for a middle-class audience, like Strauss's "Fledermaus" overture or Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol."

At Christmas, the Rockettes would dance the “Wooden Soldiers” routine created by Russell Markert. During Easter, every show would begin with a cathedral set where Rockettes and ballet dancers, dressed as nuns, would slowly carry bouquets of white lilies until they formed a gigantic cross, hit with spotlights as the music climaxed.

And if the movie happened to be short, there was time for really big production numbers like the “Undersea Ballet,” first choreographed by Florence Rogge for that cathedral of the motion picture that preceded Radio City, the Roxy Theater. The entire stage was flooded with ultraviolet light and dancers dressed as sea creatures would bob and weave in fluorescent costumes, flying through the air on wires.

The Rockettes and Corps de Ballet would do a combined version of Ravel’s “Bolero,” my dad picking up the tempo slightly each time the melody repeated, to avoid running into thousands of dollars in overtime at the end of the week. Maurice Ravel might have objected, but the composer never had to perform his piece four times a day.

Each show’s finale would have everyone on stage as the orchestra played the final notes, the folds of the motorized contour curtain would come down, the band car would descend from view into the basement and the deep notes of the organ would signal another intermission before the final showing of the movie that night.

Singers and dancers walked off stage, wishing each other goodnight, the stage managers would reset the elevators and turntable to their original positions, stagehands would raise and lower sets for the first show the following day and the block-long movie screen would slowly descend behind the curtain, ready for the film to begin.

Almost all the films were first run premieres, using their run at the theater as promotion: “Now playing everywhere after eight sold-out weeks at Radio City Music Hall.”

In the 1960’s I remember several iconic releases such as Breakfast at Tiffany’s, The Music Man and Mary Poppins. In the 1930’s it had been The Scarlet Pimpernel and The Adventures of Robin Hood. And every stage show also had a title, like Enchanted Islands produced by Leon Leonidoff or Autumn Album produced by Russell Markert.

*Dean Irwin and his father Will.*

In 1976, after the close of my first career as a high school English teacher and the beginning of a second career in broadcast television, I became a summer relief stage manager to make some money and give the three regular stage managers time to take their vacations. Suddenly the ropes and the curtains illuminated in the half-light of backstage were filled with deep responsibility. In live theater, you can't go back to fix a mistake, and from the edge of the contour curtain, I could see the rows of patrons, staring up at the movie screen, who expected a perfect show to follow. I couldn't disappoint them, or my dad, who might be conducting that day rather than one of his assistants.

Assistant stage managers had to be backstage half an hour before each show to make sure everything was in place and to make announcements on the internal PA system, where they could be heard on every floor and every dressing room. "Twenty minutes to the show," I would say, as crisply as I could. This was followed by "Ten minutes to the show" then "Eight minutes to Organ," indicating the start of the organ break, which was when people started taking their places and the stage level became crowded.

Finally, I'd announce: "Five minutes to the show, musicians in the pit please." The chief stage manager would relieve me at the Prompt side, stage right, near the main control panel and one of the electricians and I would go down to the basement where the orchestra musicians were climbing up sets of wooden stairs to take their places on the band car. The electrician, often a guy nicknamed Bumpy, nephew of the Music Hall's formidable chief electrician, would place his hand on the emergency cut-off switch on the wall.

If you weren't on the band car when the show began, you wouldn't get paid. Once a crazed musician had leapt onto the band car as the first elevator was rising and was almost cut in half as it reached the inside wall. Bumpy and I were there to make sure that didn't happen again, so when the conductor gave me the signal, I'd call upstairs for the elevator to raise the orchestra to just below audience level.

I'd return backstage and, as the overture began, I would hold a rubber-coated button with a long wire connected to the arc lights, above the third balcony, way in the back of the theater. In those days, there were no electric spotlights powerful enough to reach the Music Hall's stage from that distance, so they still operated with a 1930's carbon-arc, a curved piece of solid carbon which burned with an intensity which would blind you if you didn't view it through a thick piece of green glass built into the side of the spotlight. The lights were hot as a furnace, and the operators would have to slowly advance the carbon as it burned away.

I'd wait for the moment in the overture which called for a lighting change, push the button which signaled the arc light guys to switch their gels, turning the contour curtain from blue to red, orange to green, or whatever the show called for. The button made a loud buzz, audible not only to the arc lights but in much of the theater, but no one seemed to notice. I was on pins and needles never to miss those lighting cues hidden in the music. There are still pieces, like Gershwin's "Concerto in F", which I cannot listen to without reaching for that button.

**Look for Part 3 of this story in the August issue.**
**If you wish to read the article in its entirety, click the link below.**

Dean Irwin_Backstage at Radio City Music Hall.pdf
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***Dean Irwin** is an author and news documentary producer and editor with 35 years of experience at ABC 20/20, Nova, and NYC Media. He's the recipient of a Peabody and twelve Emmy awards. His childhood on the road, traveling across the country with his parents on the national tours of* South Pacific *and* The King and I*, provided a fertile creative ground he is currently using to write about theater history and the characters who inhabited that world. He can be reached at deanthomasirwin@gmail.com.*

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# Back Number Budd

*Before prize-winning author Ellen Gruber Garvey delivered her Zoom talk with the mysterious title, many in the audience had wondered what exactly the subject was. "Back number" in contemporary parlance means "back issue." And Robert Budd, they learned, was a uniquely interesting 19th century figure who pioneered the business of old newspapers and magazines. Garvey's talk was part of the continuing lecture series hosted by the Roosevelt Island Historical Society and our local branch of the New York Public Library.*

Today we take for granted the availability of old newspapers and other periodicals…as well as their invaluable glimpse into our past. But, Garvey pointed out, this was not the case in the 19th century.

Particularly after the invention of the telegraph allowed news to be communicated more rapidly, an outdated newspaper was thought of as waste paper. It might be used to line boxes, decorate walls, supply "toilet paper" for outhouses, start fires, or simply end up being pulped. Even the great dailies routinely discarded their exchanges from other news organizations, and barely kept copies of their own papers.

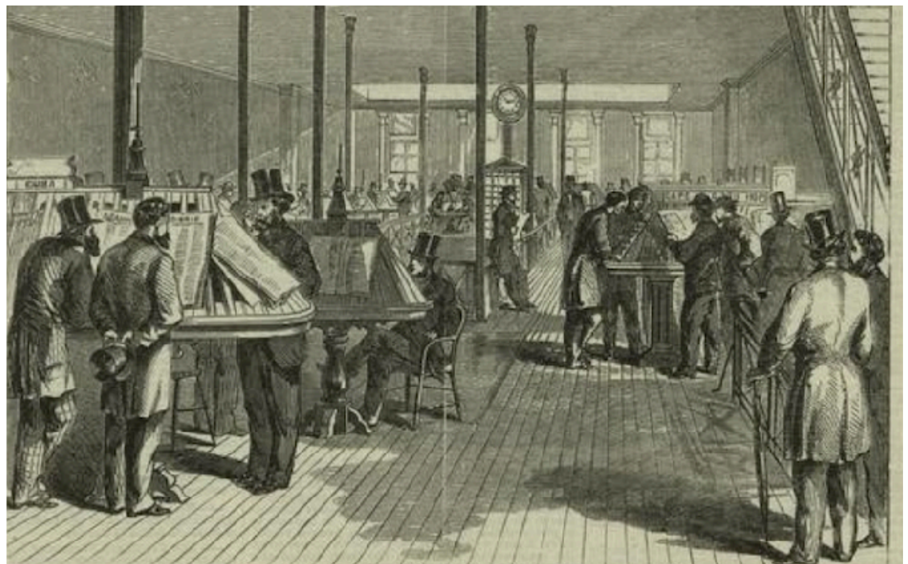
Said late 19th-century entrepreneur Frank Burrelle: "The life of a newspaper is shorter than a butterfly's." It took African-American Robert Budd, who began his working life as a bootblack, to change all that.

Budd was born in 1851 in Washington DC. Although he attended school, his education was cut short by the Civil War. Instead, he sold newspapers in the area to soldiers, who, he found, were eager to know the news. An intrepid salesman, Budd actually rode out to the battlefields by hitching onto wagons that gathered the dead.

After the Battle of Bull Run, the participants were anxious to see the news coverage of their fight—so eager, according to the speaker, they were willing to pay $3 for an already outdated publication that usually sold for three or four cents. It was then that Budd had his eureka moment: old newspapers just might be more valuable than current ones.

Budd's first newsstand after the war was in Philadelphia. In 1880 he moved to New York and two years later set up a newsstand and shoeshine business in Greeley Square at Broadway and 32nd Street. He sold current newspapers, but his seminal innovation was his collecting, sorting, and systematic organization of back issues, which he bought by the pound from local hotel lobbies, barber shops, reading rooms, other newsstands and bookstores (which sometimes had magazines as well). Ultimately he started corresponding with various archives, such as the American Antiquarian Society, seeking to buy their periodicals, and soon added even out-of-town and foreign publications to his inventory.

It wasn't long before customers beat a path to his "door." Journalists used the old papers

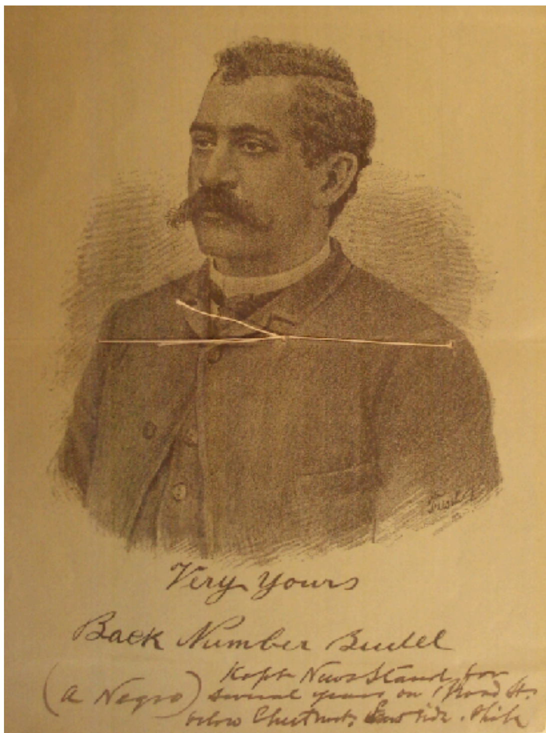


*The New York Merchants' Exchange Reading Room in the 1860s.*

for story ideas and background on current stories. Lawyers sought evidence, in writing and dated, of certain incidents. Doctors, orators, historians, writers, politicians, reading rooms and social clubs also found uses for Budd's archives.

Being a smart businessman, Budd set his prices based on the situation. Many prospective customers were angry that they had to pay more than the going everyday price for newspapers. In the end, though, they paid because they couldn't get what they wanted elsewhere.

*Greeley Square, not far from Budd's store, in the 1890s.*




*Cover of Budd's advertising booklet, 1889, signed "Back Number Budd." Image: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, [E 441 .A58 v.56 no.17]; reprinted with permission.*

After a while, reporters didn't just come to Budd for research. They came to write stories about him. The very first article celebrating his entrepreneur-ship appeared in 1885. Many others followed. Budd cultivated publicity. The articles about him were reprinted, not only locally, but countrywide, adding to his renown.

He, himself, bolstered his fame with a concerted advertising effort. He counted his inventory, claiming "4,008,492 copies in stock" encompassing "any paper ever published in any part of the world from 1833 to date." In 1889, he developed a promotional booklet, stating that his "great enterprise and success [were] becoming known the World over." And he aggrandized the size of his business in the eyes of potential clients by listing the names of all his children—even his three-year-old—on his stationery and in the City Directory. A decade later he was again writing to the American Antiquarian Society, this time, not to buy periodicals, but to sell them, offering the *Evening Post* and the *Ledger*. In addition, Garvey said, he reprinted articles about himself on the back of his stationery.

Some reporter somewhere had invented the moniker "Back Number Budd." At first it rankled. But later the innovator embraced it. It was catchy. He now had a resounding title rather than just being called Budd. Wherever and whenever his signature was required, "Back Number Budd" was how he signed.

There's no doubt about it: Back Number Budd was a success—both because his idea was visionary and because he worked extremely hard. His business day began at 6:00 am and ended at 10:00 pm. His wife and older sons helped. Often clients paid him to look through his papers and do their research for them. He had a good memory and read a

great deal, skills which no doubt added to the value of his services.

Very little in this world, however, remains static. When Budd first established himself on Greeley Square, it was a somewhat shabby part of town known as “the tenderloin.” But New York City was constantly expanding northward. Some years later, major news organizations like the New York Times and The Herald moved their headquarters to the area; department stores and gentrification followed and rents climbed. Budd was forced to move his operation to a more affordable neighborhood. In fact, he was forced to move no fewer than nine times.

*1913: Budd set up a warehouse and store in Ravenswood, Long Island City, and posed with his iconic sign pointing to his connection to newspaper history. Budd image: Technical World.*

In the late 1880s, he set up a warehouse/ store in Ravenswood (at 721 Vernon Blvd, right across from then Blackwell’s Island) and he moved his family there. For a while, the speaker related, Budd managed to continue operating another newsstand site in Manhattan as well. But by around 1905 he moved to Ravenswood entirely, because midtown rents were too high.

This was not the only challenge Budd faced. In 1895 his Ravenswood site suffered a fire. In addition, other research sources emerged. In 1911, the New York Public Library main branch reading room at 42nd Street opened, started collecting and subscribing to more newspapers, and quickly became a popular resource for reporters. And, as throughout his career, race continued to slip into the conversation.

Reporters disparaged him by writing about him in what they supposed was African-American vernacular; moreover, people did not credit his creativity and diligence, ascribing his success instead to luck, and even calling his business a swindle because of his pricing. By the time of his second, more devastating fire in Ravenswood, in 1922, which destroyed most of his papers, reporters and many others had largely forgotten about him.

Budd carried on nonetheless. He died in 1933 on Ward’s Island. In closing her talk, Garvey was adamant: Though largely unheralded today, Budd laid the groundwork for our contemporary media world.

*Editor’s note: Ellen Gruber Garvey has a particular interest in Ravenswood and asks anyone with historical knowledge of the area or leads to more photos of Budd’s Vernon Blvd. establishment to please get in touch with her: ellenggarvey@gmail.com.*

*Garvey holds a doctorate in English and is author of two prize-winning books: Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance, and The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s–1910s.*