Pull It Sir

Early Life

Joseph Pulitzer was born on April 10, 1847 in Mako, 200 kilometers south of Budapest, in a Jewish Hungarian family. As a child he was sickly and his eyesight was poor; health problems that would haunt him in later life. His parents, Louise and Philip Pulitzer, moved with their three children to Budapest when Joseph was six. He received education in the form of private tutoring and learned German and French.

Becoming a Soldier

As a 17-year-old man Pulitzer decided to join the army, but was not admitted to the Austrian, English or French military forces because of his poor eyesight. However, this was the time of the Civil War in America and a recruiter of the American Union Army offered him a possibility to enroll. Accordingly, he traveled to the United States, but jumped ship in Boston in order to enlist on his own and collect his enlistment bounty.

Getting Settled in America

After the Civil War ended the following year, Joseph Pulitzer lived in St. Louis, Missouri taking on a variety of jobs while simultaneously learning English and studying law books. In 1867, at the age of 20, he became an American citizen.

A Reporter and a Representative

His knowledge of German and his good contacts with the German community in St. Louis helped him get a job as a reporter at a German-language newspaper. It was then that he became interested in social reform and local politics as well as fighting corruption. He turned out to be an excellent reporter. In 1869 the Republicans nominated him for the state legislature. Pulitzer got elected and served one term as a representative. Later, he became a Democrat.

His First Newspaper

A few years later Pulitzer bought his first newspaper, the St. Louis Post, and soon merged it with another title he purchased, the St. Louis Dispatch, into the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. From a failing newspaper on the verge of bankruptcy, it turned into a very successful publication.

The Secret Behind His Success

A few factors earned Joseph Pulitzer a position of one of America’s most influential journalists and businessmen of his time: his conviction that social reform was an urgent issue of the 19th century America, his intuition as to what topics were the most interesting for the working class that comprised the majority of readers, his courage to expose corruption, and his enthusiasm to pursue his way of thinking.

An Innovator

He introduced new columns such as a sports page and a women’s page, which turned out to be a big success. Another brilliant and novel idea was to publish an evening newspaper. He understood that people wanted to read in their free time, after work. The morning papers brought readers the news that they had already read in Pulitzer’s paper the previous evening.

An undated photo of Joseph Pulitzer (AP Photos)
Reaching out to the Readers

He believed that newspapers should reach poor workers. Therefore, they should not be expensive. His newspaper cost 2 cents. He urged his reporters to listen to the street, find stories that were of interest for an average citizen. This also meant listening to the gossip in the streets and sensational journalism. But at the same time Pulitzer encouraged his reporters to interview politicians, ask them difficult questions so that those who are in public service are also held accountable for their decisions, spending, etc.

How to Build the Best Team of Reporters

Pulitzer wanted to employ the best journalists and he knew that in order to have them, he had to pay them well. His ideas and efforts paid off. His reporters were advised to write in a simple, colloquial style so that average readers could understand, but at the same time present the topic in a lively manner so that they would remember.

The New York World

In the early 1880s Pulitzer’s health deteriorated and he was advised to travel to Europe to rest and recover. However, on his way he stopped in New York, where an opportunity to buy a failing paper The New York World occurred. He would not allow himself to miss a possibility like this. When he bought it the paper sold 15,000 copies daily. Six years later the circulation was 15 million copies.

Pulitzer’s Genius

Pulitzer’s genius consisted of being open to new ideas and innovations. He had the sixth sense about what can enhance the attractiveness of newspapers and boost readership. He envisioned the importance of graphics and visuals. The design was an important factor. Different sections of the newspaper had to look different. Drawings made their appearance on the pages of his newspapers and colored cartoon strips known as the “Sunday Funnies” built a new audience, children.

Fight for Dominance on the Journalist Market

Another chapter of Pulitzer’s journalistic activity was a time of fierce competition for dominance of the newspaper market with another newspaper mogul, William Randolph Hearst. It coincided with a political tension between the United States and Spain and in order to gain more popularity with readers they both advocated a war with Spain in 1898. This is a less glamorous period marked by the outburst of yellow journalism based on sensationalism, an engagement in which Pulitzer himself may have regretted. After all, he believed in good journalism and its vital role for a good democracy.

Message About the Essence of Journalism

The words inscribed on the wall of Columbia’s School of Journalism, which he started at the end of his life, read:

Our republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the fight and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery.
American Writers’ Dream

The Pulitzer Prize is among the best an American journalist, writer, photographer or musician can be awarded. And it is not so much about money, but about the prestige which opens new career opportunities for the winners.

Joseph Pulitzer was not only a man who revolutionized American journalism. He was also a visionary who believed in the importance of education and professionalism. He conceived an idea to fund an award for those who excel in the field of journalism as well as to establish a school of journalism. Even though realization of these two ideas took years to materialize and lots of consultations along the way, the prize and the school turned out to be the most conspicuous contributions of Pulitzer to American journalism. Both have been in operation for a hundred years.

The Pulitzer Prize originally comprised 9 prizes in journalism, books and drama, and education. Today, the number has grown to 21. Twenty of these prizes are now $10,000 each, while one is a gold medal without a pecuniary award.

To only list all names of the winners of the Pulitzer Prizes since 1917, when they were first awarded, is not feasible for the shortage of space, so let us just very randomly select some of them.

Among the Pulitzer Prizes the only award that has the form of a gold medal is the Public Service Award which has been awarded since 1917 to a newspaper or, nowadays, also a news site for “a distinguished example of meritorious public service.”

Coverage of important problems (for example environmental), exposing corruption or wrongdoing, a successful campaign for a good social cause such as stiffening the law against pollution, calling public attention to various issues, investigation of illegal acts, and exposing fraud are the most frequent justifications in awarding this prize. For example in 1973 the Prize was awarded to The Washington Post for “its investigation of the Watergate case.” In 2005 Los Angeles Times got the prize for “its courageous, exhaustively researched series exposing deadly medical problems and racial injustice at a major public hospital.” In 2006 The Times-Picayune, New Orleans was awarded the prize for “its heroic, multi-faceted coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.” That same year also Sun Herald, Biloxi-Gulfport received the prize for “valorous and comprehensive coverage of Hurricane Katrina.” In 2012 The Philadelphia Inquirer was the winner for “its exploration of pervasive violence in the city’s schools, using powerful print narratives and videos to illuminate crimes committed by children against children and to stir reforms to improve safety for teachers and students.” This year the winner is Associated Press “For an investigation of severe labor abuses tied to the supply of seafood to American supermarkets and restaurants, reporting that freed 2,000 slaves, brought perpetrators to justice and inspired reforms.” Some of the names of the newspapers that have repeatedly won this prize include among others The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and The New York Times.


While in a number of categories in journalism the prize is won by a team of journalists who were working on some coverage together, some of the categories are individual. Among them we find Editorial Cartooning awarded for
“distinguished cartoon or portfolio of cartoons, characterized by originality, editorial effectiveness, quality of drawing and pictorial effect, published as a still drawing, animation or both.” This category was first introduced in 1922 and on The Pulitzer Prize website http://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/215 you can see the works of the winning cartoonists since 1995.

The categories within the Letters, Drama & Music Pulitzer include: Fiction (before 1948 it was named Novel,) Drama, History, Biography or Autobiography which have been awarded since 1917 and categories added later include: Poetry (since 1922) The 1918 and 1918 awards were made possible by a special grant from The Poetry Society/), General Nonfiction (since 1962) and Music (since 1943).


In the Biography or Autobiography Category we will find the only winning book by a U.S. President. It is Profiles in Courage, by John F. Kennedy, awarded in 1957.


SOME OF THE FICTION, DRAMA AND POETRY WINNERS’ GALLERY

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

JOHN UPDIKE

TONI MORRISON (AP Photos)

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

TONY KUSHNER

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA (AP Photos)

ROBERT FROST

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

C.K. WILLIAMS (AP Photos)
DECEMBER 2016 TRIVIA QUESTION

At which University is the School of Journalism established by Joseph Pulitzer?

Send the answer (with your home address) to:
KrakowAIRC@state.gov

The 1st, the 8th and 14th sender of the correct answer will be awarded with a book prize.

Deadline:
January 10, 2017

NOVEMBER 2016 Answer:

Colorado became a state 100 years after the Declaration of Independence

The winners are:
Karolina from Gaj, Piotr from Skarzysko-Kamienna, and Brygida from Poznan

CONGRATULATIONS!!!
The prizes will be sent to you by mail.

Zoom is online at
www.usinfo.pl/zoom/

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