

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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NY Times Front Page

The jigsaw puzzle was fully assembled, giving me a look at the front page of the New York Times. One headline blares, “Surprise roundup of aliens illegally in U.S.” Others say “Basra battle reported” and “Air raid on Mosul.”

Those very current headlines do not come from this year’s news. The puzzle was a birthday present, a copy of the front page from my actual birth date, May 18, 1941. But the headlines could have been written today. Of course the stories under those headlines are different. R.A.F planes were bombing Mosul, and the Basra battle was between British and German forces. The illegal immigrants included Germans and Italians worked in big city hotels, and they were detained at Ellis Island.

Other columns are definitely from that pre-war time. The U.S. retained its non-combatant role in that early part of World War II, but every story touched on the conflict. Battles in Africa and British bombing of the French coast merited their own stories. President Roosevelt’s actions dominated two stories. One concerned the nation’s ability to conduct international trade in a world dominated by totalitarian governments. The second story challenged Vichy France on its collaboration with the Nazis.

Two stories covered labor issues. Anthracite coal workers were striking, though soft coal miners deferred their walkout. Unionized factory workers had just agreed to work a 60-hour week in recognition of the urgency of the defense program.

A special sports recap shows the important sporting events of that era. Horse racing, the New York Major League teams and Ivy League rowing, track and field results all merited a front page mention.

Eight columns of hard news, without photos, filled the page.

Two names caught my attention. One the few bylines went to C.L. Sulzberger, later to become a prominent foreign correspondent and editorial columnist for the paper. Claude Pepper is the other name. A Florida senator at that time, he commented on a meeting with the President. I remember him as a long-serving congressman and was surprised to see that his career spanned so many years. Congressman Pepper died in office in 1989.

I checked this year’s May 18th copy of the Times to see how it compared with my puzzle. It is the Sunday edition, just as it was in 1941. The price has grown from 10 cents (late city edition) to \$5 (New England edition). And only one story talks about the Middle East.

The intervening years have changed the function of newspapers, so most front page stories lack the immediacy of the earlier year. Americans get the news hourly from television and instantaneously on the Internet. We do not buy the paper on Sunday to find out what the President said on Saturday afternoon.

So this year’s Times carried only one up-to-the minute news item, a story about the China earthquake. Other stories could have been written days or weeks ahead of time: Crime tipsters, Obama’s books, apologetic doctors and world crop research. Even the lone Middle East item read more like a feature article, an interview with a Lebanese kidnap victim. We are directed to inside pages to learn about Senator Kennedy’s seizure.

My puzzle sits complete on the coffee table, and my history lesson is over. Now I just have to decide what to do with the finished product.