

UNION RULES

By James Collins.

In the summer of 1955, my father, who was a union organizer in the 30s, obtained a union card for me in local 881, the warehouseman's union, as a summer substitute. When union men went on vacation, the union needed a replacement to handle the workload. Therefore, every couple of weeks, I obtained a different assignment. I worked in a bonded warehouse, just off the docks in hell's kitchen. I worked at a normal warehouse in Midtown Manhattan. The union then assigned me to a cold storage warehouse on Third Avenue and 149 Street in the Bronx where the inside temperatures varied from 20F to 0F. Many stories evolve from this assignment but the most notable of all was when I got involved with a personal vendetta between two members of a three-man team. Unfortunately, I was the third man of this team, replacing a man on vacation.

The team lead, Vincenzo, was an Italian-American built like a bull, who claimed he had ties to the Mafia. The object of his derision, Otto, was a German-American equally massive, who normally spoke very little. Nobody told me about the altercation between these two. When I showed up for work on their floor, which was at 20F, you could cut the tension with a knife. Vinnie as he told me to call him advised me that our job was to organize and stack 500-pound casks of pickles. Each cask on end was about 4 foot high and 3-foot diameter at the middle. They filled the floor of the cold storage warehouse, which looked like an airplane hangar. The initial part of the task was relatively simple as we put two by fours into parallel lines about 3 feet across and about 60 feet in length on the floor butted end to end. Then we each took a cask, pulled it over on its side and rolled it on to the pair of sticks and chocked the ends so the cask would not move. Each cask or barrel butted against the previous barrel until we had a continuous row of them lined up on the sticks. Then the job got more interesting. We then put a second row of 2 x 4 sticks on top of the existing row of barrels and Otto, who was an expert in this matter, chocked the sticks so they would not move. Then they wheeled out a marvelous machine, which could have been a torture device in the Inquisition. This massive device stood about 6 foot tall. It formed the letter L with wheels at the juncture. A 4' x 4' rigid steel plate acted as the base sitting between two steel girders that sat on the ground acting as counterbalances. The torture device was a large crank handle on a turning device that moved the base up from the floor to a height of 6 feet. Easy to do when it was unloaded, back breaking when it had a 500-pound cask on the base. I learned I was the designated crank operator. Each of the other team members would bring a cask to the machine at the end of the row. They would position it on the base and they would roll it on the wheels up to the row. At that point, I would start cranking. I had to bring the cask up level with the upper sticks. Then I would hold the machine steady and my two compatriots would roll the cask onto the two sticks and move it to the middle of the row. This would continue until we filled half the row. We would then cart the machine around to the other side and continue this operation until the second half of the row was complete. Then to my horror, I learned there was a third row. I now had to raise each of the remaining casks up to six feet. All the time I was working on the crank, there was total silence between the other two members of the team. Many glares, lots of grunts, some heavy breathing and a lot of sweat, but no one said a word. The smell of that floor of the warehouse was memorable. The pickle barrels always leaked and the smell of pickles was everywhere. It was on your clothes in your hair and most importantly on

your hands. After several hours, hands turned bright yellow and maintained this patina for the better part of a week and a half.

To say that I was exhilarated when quitting time came would be an understatement. I had worked unloading boxcars in the rail yards and I loaded and unloaded 18 wheel trucks in the heat of summer. Nothing compared to the unrelenting stress and strain of this job. We went down to the locker room to get a drink of water, change from winter wear to summer clothes and to punch out on the time clock. The shop foreman came over and saw me looking like I had been through a wringer.

"Hey kid, looks like you finally got to do a real man's work for a change. You young kids these days are soft. You are not used to really working hard. You do 30 or 40 barrels and you look like you been beat up by a football team. You have no idea what tough work is."

"If I did 30 or 40 barrels I would be smiling and breathing nice and easy. We did 103 barrels and it was as tough as working unloading boxcars in the rail yards, which I did last week. Do not give me any of your bullshit about not being able to do the job. I kept up with the other two members of my team, and I'm not breathing as hard as they are."

"What do you mean a hundred and three barrels? A team of three men normally does 30 to 40 barrels in a shift."

"You think I can't count? We did 103 and I have a notepad in my pocket to keep track of how much we did each hour."

With that, the Foreman turned around and hollered for Vinnie and Otto, to come over to where we were standing.

"Vinnie, the kid here says you did 103 barrels and he has a little notebook, to prove it. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Vinnie flustered, replied, "Otto and me were having a bad day. We just hunkered down and started working without talking or being distracted. The kid here worked alongside us and before we knew it we had done over 100 barrels."

"You dumb bastard, you know our quota is 35 barrels maximum for a shift of three people. If you start turning out 103 for a shift will be out of work in no time. Come over here, we will have to work this out. Send the kid home."

The next day when I showed up for work, I learned the three of us were in the doghouse. Since 103 barrels was the quota for three days, three of us had to sit on the floor, in the OF freezer, against the wall for two full days. It was like being in Siberia while in the middle of summer. This was the union's response and you have to follow union rules. I never forgot that summer job.

The only perk was when I rode the subway coming home from work exhausted I always got a seat. In fact, when I entered the hot subway car, I reeked of pickles had bright yellow hands to the wrist and

looked like hell. Everybody moved away from me as if I was a homeless person who had not bathed for a month. If I stood close to someone who was sitting down, they got up and I got a seat. Immediately there were empty seats on either side of me and I fell asleep. Hard to forget that summer

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