

# The Saturday Evening Post:

## Telling America's Story for 289 Years

By Steven Slon, Editorial Director and Associate Publisher

**The Saturday Evening Post traces its lineage back to Ben Franklin in 1728. It was in that year that Franklin launched a publication called the Pennsylvania Gazette. He ran that for a few decades, and then it transferred ownership a few times, finally becoming, in 1821, The Saturday Evening Post.**

Now, the Post in the 19th century was a business magazine primarily, and it had a good circulation—at its peak it sold 90,000 copies per issue. But by 1897, the publication had pretty much run its course. It had less than 2,000 readers, and the owner sold it to Philadelphia-based publisher Cyrus Curtis for a song. Curtis, in one of the defining moments of his career, hired the brilliant editor, George Horace Lorimer to helm the magazine. He would stay on the job for his entire career, until retiring in 1937.

Lorimer started out by spending quite a bit of Curtis's money but the publisher maintained his faith in the new editor. As the story goes, the bean counters rolled up to Curtis a little way into Lorimer's tenure and informed him that his new editor had run up \$900,000 in debt. Curtis responded: "Well, you know, I like round numbers. Come back to me when it's \$1 million."

### In Today's Dollars Around \$25 Million

That took nerve. Some would say, vision. So, what was this new magazine that was costing all this money? Its core philosophy could be described as a belief in the American dream, the ability for any American to aspire to greatness through education and hard work. Lorimer envisioned the reader as a well-rounded, businessperson who ought to be versed in art, literature and culture. So amidst articles on investments and management and personal improvement, the Post also published thousands of short stories, and serialized countless novels. In fact, the writers published by the Post over the next 70 years are a who's who of American literature, including such names as Sinclair Lewis, Agatha Christie, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald. In more recent times, such literary lights as Joan Didion, Kurt Vonnegut and J.D. Salinger published stories in the Post.

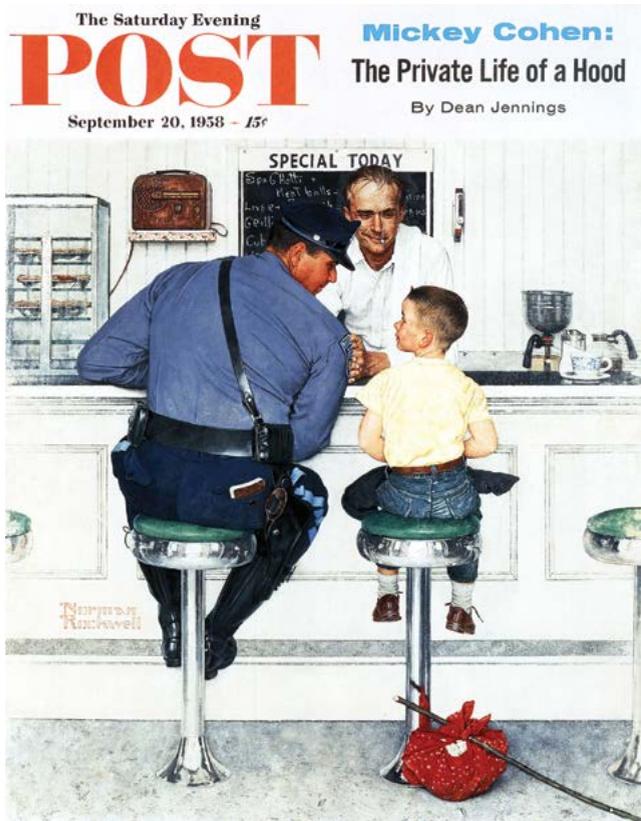


Lorimer's approach proved successful and the Post was soon profitable. By the nineteen teens its circulation had soared to 2 million and would reach 6 million at its highest point in the early sixties.

**The secret to its success?** "The Post was one of the few publications that saw America as a truly united country," says Joan SerVaas, the current publisher of the magazine. She explains that when Curtis and Lorimer bought the magazine into the 20th century, America was not truly united. There were pockets of immigrants all over, speaking different languages, maintaining different cultures. Travel was difficult and these pockets of distinct groups of Americans didn't mingle. On top of that, the wounds of the Civil War were still fresh. "The post reflected the ideal of a united America and helped to define what it meant to be an American," says SerVaas.

Along the way, Lorimer discovered the then-unknown Norman Rockwell, a 22-year-old artist who humbly showed up at the company's Philadelphia offices in 1916. Lorimer rarely bought more than one painting at a time from a given artist but he must have seen something in the young man. He bought 3 paintings on the spot and then commissioned 2 more. Rockwell, over the years, would paint more than 300 covers for the post.

In 1970, the Post changed ownership, and came into the holdings of visionary businessman and entrepreneur Beurt SerVaas. SerVaas moved the publication from



Philadelphia to his home town of Indianapolis, where it is published to this day. Joan SerVaas, Beurt's daughter, now oversees the operation, which also includes two legendary children's magazines, Jack & Jill and Humpty Dumpty.

**So, what is the Post focused on today?** The mission, says SerVaas, is to continue in legacy of George Horace Lorimer in providing the very best in reporting, fiction and art.

The publication's motto is "Celebrating America, Past, Present and Future." Articles in the contemporary Post offer historical perspective on today's events in a way that no other magazine can. As an example, last year the Post interviewed historian David McCullough who'd recently written a book about the Wright brothers. To accompany the piece, the Post reprinted an article penned by none other than Orville Wright, describing that historic day at Kitty Hawk in vivid detail. The Post has also commissioned several stories about the recent banking crisis with archival material brought in to help readers understand that American financial history has been, through the ages, a continuous story of boom-and-bust.

Subject matter also includes travel, health news, recipes, opinion and humor. Readers particularly enjoy a special section called "The Vault," featuring selected articles and art from the archives, including a page devoted to a work by Norman Rockwell.

Maintaining its historic role, the Post also carries new fiction in each issue, and to encourage new writers, the company sponsors an annual fiction contest with a cash

prize to the winner and publication in the magazine. The magazine's digital efforts are growing and subscribers will soon have access to all content dating back to 1821 as well as to a vast library of the more than 3,000 covers painted between 1900 and 1970, including the works of Norman Rockwell, J.C. Lyendecker, N.C. Wyeth and hundreds more. To view selected sample issues from the Post archive, go to [Saturdayeveningpost.com/archivesample](http://Saturdayeveningpost.com/archivesample).

Finally, in the interests of sharing the great treasure that is the Post library, the company publishes four special issues each year, mining its archive for the best material on important themes. Some popular recent special issues are "Remembering Pearl Harbor" (with original reporting of that horrific event), "Automobiles in America" (featuring period interviews with the earliest carmakers plus dozens of pages of beautiful car ads from a bygone era) and "Baseball in America" (featuring Rockwell's wonderful baseball-themed paintings as well as original interviews with Babe Ruth, Connie Mack, Jackie Robinson and more). The baseball special is on newsstands everywhere starting on March 21 but any of these can be purchased at [shopthepost.com](http://shopthepost.com).

If you count from 1921, the Post has been around for 196 years. If you count the legacy as extending to Ben Franklin's original publication, you're talking about 289 years. Once America's most popular magazine, its history is America's history, offering a continuous record of this country and its people through centuries of change.