

## THE PERILS OF A DIRECTORY MAN

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As I've commented in the past, we often do not think about what lies behind the records we see. Such is the case with city directories.

Andrew Boyd was a major publisher of directories in the latter nineteenth century. He published hundreds of directories, mostly in Pennsylvania and upstate New York. (The examples below were taken from *Boyd's Daily Journal City Directory of Syracuse*, but probably appeared in many of his publications.)

Boyd seems to have been a bit sensitive about criticism of the accuracy of his directories. The title page often carried the quote "He that writes or makes a feast, more certainly invites his judges than his friends; there's not a guest but that will find something wanting or ill drest."

In one year, in sort of an editor's note entitled "Preliminary Egotism," he says "As usual we have given all possible care to the canvass and compilation of our directory—an imperfect task at best." Another time he explains that corrections can be submitted to his office and that a copy of the current directory is available in which corrections can be written.

The following appeared in the directories of 1874–5, preceded by a cartoon illustration:

### THE PERILS OF A DIRECTORY MAN

Podunk, May, 1874.

Mr. Andrew Boyd:—

*Dear Sir:*—Your name, at the opening of this letter, is the last one I shall ever attempt to write in connection with the Directory business, unless it be my own at the bottom of the page.

In making this announcement I am agitated by conflicting emotions: sadness at finding myself out of "business," jostles with joy at getting out of this particular branch. A few weeks since I was peacefully employed in domestic duties, and watching the uncertain race between the grass and the potatoes in my garden, and yet I was not happy! I became possessed of an insane desire to enter your employ, and speedily rise to the dignity of an accomplished professional in the art of Directory-making. To-day I am cured; metaphorically speaking, "I have seen the elephant."

If you blame me for deserting you, let me recount to you my recent experience. It must stir your heart to its depths, for surely you must long ago "have been there" yourself. You will remember my several days schooling at your office in the complicated details of taking information for the Directory. Previous to that, I had been haunted by a suspicion that the Directory business would do well enough to pass away a few weeks time; that it was a very simple profession, and that what little I didn't already know about it I should pick up in an hour or two. It sounds paradoxical to say that with all my vain pretensions I knew very much less after my office experience with you, than I had supposed I did when I entered upon it. The sunshine

of my self-conceit vanished beneath the clouds of your sharp examinations of the work of every one of the twenty men you employed. I recall how almost every one of them had, with me, the same exalted opinion of his own knowledge of the business, and its utter insignificance; how, as a consequence, every one of them persisted in making his own peculiar figures and letters, many of which I humbly confess to you, might appropriately adorn a tea chest; how, after your oft-repeated earnest counsel, which we oft mistook for anger, every mother's son of us could remember anything and everything but what you had said, could make a letter *any* way but the right way, and which I now confess was in every instance *your* way. I recall, also, how we often sneered at your persistent firmness in having things right; your great love and pride in your numerous books, that they be handsome, complete, *satisfactory*; *be all that you promised*.

I know that in all your work you were conscientious to a fault, careful and particular (too much so, we thought,) in little trifles; that you spent hours far into the night, revising, overlooking, comparing, compiling, when you should have been on "downy bed of ease." I am well aware that the thousands who daily refer to your numerous Directories little dream of the brain-work, and anxiety, and debilitating excitement expended in their publication. If you ever die, (which you may,) I here contribute an epitaph:—"Worn out by overwork of mind and body, and anxiety regarding the obligations of honor."

But all of this is no balm to my wounded spirit and torn clothing! Canvassing is what has driven from my heart all ambition to be a great Directory publisher like you. Yes, sir, it was canvassing, sir, and nothing else. Can a sensitive man be expected to endure it, when a woman, after being politely asked for necessary Directory information, angrily retorts, "No, we can't help beggars; go to the Poor Master!" Another one answered in astonishment, a request for her name, "Give you our name? No, sir! We know what you want, you want to give it to the Tax Collector! Another time I had a door slammed in my face, with, "No! we don't want to buy anything to-day!" while a fourth yelled, "Get out of that, or I'll scall' ye!" Why, Mr. Boyd, I begin to think it a direct interposition of Providence that I am alive!

To-day I have borne the last feather, and it came very near breaking my back. I learned when I went to a country school, that "the dog is a noble animal." So he is perhaps; but one of his noblest acts is not attacking an unprotected Directory canvasser in the rear! That is what he did to me to-day, and my feelings and my clothing are too much lacerated to admit of further details, in the absence of which I send you a sketch of the whole business.

Farewell! I can write no more; I have been put in "my little bed." I *tender* you my resignation at once; you are welcome to "my back pay." Let those who complain of errors in a directory, try canvassing for it, if only for one

day, and they will learn that to err is human, and how sublime a thing it is to forgive.

C. A. N. VASSER