

Chronicles

Collected columns,

2000-2005

By Ray Barrington

DEDICATION

To Stephanie, who tolerates the fact that I love her more than anything else.

And to the memory of The Green Bay News-Chronicle, and all who sailed on her.

© 2011 Ray Barrington

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-1-105-03526-5

Contact the author at ray.columns@yahoo.com

CONTENTS

Chapter 1: The Packers

Chapter 2: Life During Wartime

Chapter 3: Green Bay

Chapter 4 Hitting the Road

Chapter 5: On Wisconsin

Chapter 6: Politics and Other Silliness

Chapter 7: Some Other Sports

Chapter 8: Partly Personal

Chapter 9: Saying Goodbye

INTRODUCTION

From 1972 to 2005, Green Bay, Wis. - the home of the Packers, and the toilet paper capital of the world - had two newspapers. The lesser one, in size, circulation, staff and money, was The Green Bay News-Chronicle.

From 1985 to 2005 - with a year off for good behavior in 1993 - I wrote for The News-Chronicle. I held a variety of jobs, and served as both sports and news editor. From 1988 to 1993, I either was Green Bay Packers beat writer, or sports editor.

After 2003, I was in news, but also did the occasional sports column. Starting in 2000, I added a weekly general column to my duties. That's where most of the material in here comes from, with the addition of a few extra columns, and the story I wrote about The News-Chronicle in its final issue.

The columns are arranged in some pretty loose groupings, so if you don't care about local politics, you may skip that part to get to the Packers, or vice versa. I've tried to provide some information about some of the issues that have sort of withered away in the meantime.

I was lucky in that the columns were usually weekly. Doing a daily column - if you have anything else going on in your life at all - is a sign of madness. Red Smith - who also spent time in Green Bay - once had a

college girl hear about his work, and she exclaimed, “A theme a day!” in roughly the same tones you might hear after admitting you ate scorpions for breakfast.

Chapter 1:

THE PACKERS

If you live in Green Bay, you are going to write about the Green Bay Packers, just as if you are a journalist in Washington, you are going to write about politics.

Green Bay is a major Wisconsin medical center, home to several paper mills, a state university (and a very good private one next door in De Pere), manufactures furniture and even boasts Elvis Presley's favorite roller coaster.

Which is ignored by the rest of the world. Any time I am out of state and mention where I'm from, the first question will be about the Packers.

I have had the good fortune to cover the team in good times (Super Bowl 31, for those of you allergic to roman numerals) and bad (just about everything before that going back to 1968). Now that they have added another championship, the legend continues to grow.

And I must admit, being a fan is a lot easier than being a writer covering the team.

No Final Defeat at Lambeau Field

January 2, 2004

Sunday started out slowly, and not happily. I got a new Packers sweatshirt with a hood from my sister for Christmas and planned to wear it, but when I got it out I discovered the "inktag" anti-theft device hadn't been taken off.

You can't take those things off without leaving a mess. So we had to make a stop at the appropriate store for a quick exchange before heading to the stadium.

No chance to get charcoal, etc., for tailgating, so we just hit McDonald's and ate that in the parking area (about a half-block from the stadium - not bad). By 3:15 when the game started, we knew Dallas had choked, so the Packers had to win and hope for a Minnesota loss. (The Packers didn't put the scores on the board.)

And as the Packers and Broncos warmed up Sunday, I started thinking about the year past.

It hasn't been a good one. The stories I've covered seem to be never ending, filled not with hope but with conflict.

The feuding on the County Board, the never-ending water talks, and the troops saying good-bye to go to battle ... well, I'm not sure what.

And at home and work, the slumping economy took its toll. My wife had health problems, as have I. She changed jobs, and many of my co-workers left.

So I sat there, in the wind, and cheered for what was good - the game was one-sided, but thrilling with Ahman Green's 98-yard touchdown run after the fourth-and-2 stop, followed immediately by the kickoff fumble and another TD. The crowd sort of settled down, waiting for the bad news from Arizona.

It seemed to be a microcosm of the year. The Packers had worked hard, as had we. But little mistakes here and there would overcome all the good that had been done, and the prideful play of the good days would be forgotten.

Then, from lower in the stadium, a buzz and chants of "Let's go Cardinals..." Then cheering. Back in our seats - tucked under the south scoreboard - we knew something good, but what? We saw celebration on the sideline. Cell phones were beeping. Fans under the luxury boxes were ignoring everything on the field to look at the Vikings-Cardinals action on TV and seeing somebody named Nathan Poole score the winning touchdown. For the Cardinals.

And finally, after the final gun, the flash on the scoreboard ... "2003 NFC NORTH CHAMPIONS."

And everyone went nuts. I don't remember celebrating like this after beating Carolina to go to the Super Bowl. The roar was amazing, and going through the concourses and ramps, LOUD. By the time we got to our car, people were running through the streets high-fiving people in cars.

And before I finally got to sleep that night, I hoped it was an omen. That Brett Favre had overcome his own pain to find strength, and the joy of an unexpected championship.

That once in a while, good things happen to good people.

That we can find strength to go on, and if we do, we will (to steal a line from William Faulkner) not only endure, but prevail.

It's been a while since I went to a game like that.

And so I go into 2004 more optimistic than I would have thought, rallied not by a football victory but by a basic thought: Just as there are no final victories, neither are there any final defeats, as long as there are still efforts to be made.

Response to a Screeed from Philadelphia

January 9, 2004

Mr. William Bunch

Philadelphia Daily News

Philadelphia, PA

Dear Bill,

Somebody sent me a copy of your column about our fair city - we looked it up in the Wisconsin law books, and we're the third-largest city in the state, even though you don't think we're a city - and I had to drop a note to respond.

You were nice enough to say good things about our quarterback, Brett Favre (you even spelled it correctly) and how he's overcome adversity. So we'll say something good about your quarterback, Donovan McNabb.

He's even better at selling soup than Reggie White, a man who had to flee Philly to play on a Super Bowl champion.

Oh, I can understand your envy, your need to hate Green Bay. I can even understand your need to rip us for being small:

"Green Bay doesn't deserve a professional sports franchise any more than our own beloved neighborhood of

Frankford or Pottsville or Pottstown or wherever the heck that place is that Gov. Rendell was trying to get the 1925 NFL title restored when he was supposed to be passing the state budget."

Ah, but they didn't support their teams. Nor, for that matter, did Los Angeles. Green Bay has tens of thousands of people waiting to buy season tickets. The only line that long in Philadelphia is for people waiting to boo something ... anything ... just to keep in practice.

Granted, you have many more things to do. You have a city that is full of history, with Independence Hall and the many other Colonial-era edifices. Has anything happened there since, oh, 1776? Except for Legionnaire's disease and the police bombing citizen's houses? Green Bay may be dull, but you'll survive.

(Oops, I forgot that movie. At least we have a statue of Vince Lombardi, a real person. Your statue is of a bad actor playing a fictional character. And it took him a sequel to win a fight.)

You attack us for our dining habits: "There's one other thing to do in Green Bay - drink. Under the heading of 'Entertainment,' a Web site doesn't have 'Nightlife' but there's a massive section for 'Taverns' - as if there's a difference between the Buck Stop Inn and the creatively named Watering Hole Tavern. You're certainly better off drinking than eating. The 'Restaurant' section lists all nine of Green Bay's Taco Bells under the heading 'ethnic.'"

Well, at least we aren't proud of putting ugly glop on a bad cut of meat and passing it off as a "cheese steak" when there's bad cheese and thinly-cut horsemeat in reality, covered with enough fungus to engulf a toad.

And, of course, here in the land of cheese, we look upon your cream cheese with disdain, considering it a poor flavoring for a bagel.

Of course, you rib us for being "the toilet paper capital of the world," but if we weren't, you'd be doing your column at a stand-up desk, I'd bet. You go after a few of our players, but every city (Allen Iverson) with a team has a few bad actors (Allen Iverson) who get in trouble with the law (Allen Iverson).

Another of your comments: "Most of the Green Bay football myth is exactly that - myth. Take Lambeau Field's legendary 'frozen tundra,' a clever turn-of-phrase phrase made famous by - you guessed it - a Philadelphian, legendary NFL Films voice John Facenda." If you had hustled out to the NFL Films offices, they would have told you Facenda never said that. Blame Chris Berman of ESPN.

At least our turf doesn't end careers, as your Veterans Stadium turf did. (Oh, and we haven't had a railing fall off our stadium yet, as yours did during a game.)

I shouldn't be mean; you have a pair of nice new facilities, both named after banks, which fits modern sports nicely. But you opened Lincoln Financial Field with ... a soccer game! What are you people, Communists?

And you got to a Super Bowl in 1981, overworking Dick Vermeil so much he's done nothing but cry since.

But you have to go back to 1960 to remember Lombardi's only title game loss, to the Eagles at Franklin Field, which was also built in 1776. First, you wouldn't have won had not Chuck Bednarik played both ways; we have respect for him as you do for Brett Favre.

And second, just two years earlier, the worst Packers team in history finished 1-10-1. Its only win that year came over ... nah, I can't twist the knife.

Yours in sport, Ray Barrington

Checking the Mailbag for Ticking Packages

January 13, 2004

First off, an apology. Not for what I said, but the fact that I said it. I'll stand behind every insult to the good name of Philadelphia that appeared in this space Friday, but I do regret that I wrote the column. To respond in kind to Philly News writer William "don't get your undies in a" Bunch and the rest of that batch of bottom-feeding, outhouse-dwelling, humanity-insulting corrupters of the written word known as the Philadelphia journalism community was beneath me, and I apologize to you, dear reader.

And that's considering I went easier on you than your fans did - chants referring to body parts and upraised fingers greeted Packers fans at Sunday's game. Ah, the City of Brotherly Love.

That said, as you can imagine, the old e-mail bag was bulging after it ran and after Sunday's events, as events do, ensued.

Before Sunday, most of the comments were local. Here are a few:

On nothing good coming from Philadelphia, from David: "Philadelphia was the home of 'American Bandstand' for 6 1/2 years (1957-1964) ... but even Dick Clark left for browner pastures when he could.

'American Bandstand' helped governments be what they are today ... a song and dance can be heard at damn near every one."

And from James: "We do lack the raw edginess that big city living can give a fan, making him wildly happy when his team wins and enthusiastically abusive at all other times. Maybe our journalists just aren't as adept at chumming the waters with hate. Glad I live in smallville.

"Oh, by the way, Bill, if you ever get to Green Bay, please do try some of our 'ethnic' cuisine at one of our fine Taco Bells. I hate it when my favorite restaurants (i.e. our non-franchised fine food establishments) are crowded by unappreciative big city critics. I prefer to savor my meals in pleasant company.

"Mmmm... now that's good Eagle!"

Julie writes: "Thanks for your great refute today! You said what we all would like to ... as a Green Bay native, I might complain, but don't you dare speak ill of any of us."

And Dave from Columbia, Md., added another great moment in Wisconsin-Philadelphia relations: "You forgot: 1983 - Moses Malone, when asked to predict the upcoming playoffs, he said, 'Fo, Fo, Fo.' The result was, Fo, Five, Fo. The only loss was to the Bucks."

For some reason, only one comment from the Philadelphia area, as Tommy provided a fair point of correction:

"Even though I'm from South Philly, I liked your article and your wit. However, Philadelphia Cream Cheese has no connection to Philadelphia, Pa., except a coincidental name. The cream cheese is actually from the small town of Philadelphia, N.Y."

Of course, after Sunday's Eagles victory, the tone (and origin of messages) changed: "Hey Ray," wrote "Kid Lightning," (real name Matt) "of course we're going to look down at the booming metropolis of Green Bay. 100,000 people. Hell, we've had more folks than that sitting in cells waiting for their hearing at Eagles Court when Dallas was in town.

"Prior to 'Rocky's' release most folks thought of Philadelphia as a particularly dirty, ugly and uncivilized place where most people were ill tempered, ignorant, brutes. After Rocky was released the rest of America figured out that Philadelphia was a particularly dirty, ugly and uncivilized place where most people are ill-tempered, ignorant brutes, but we could care less what you think about us, so SHUDUPABOUDIDWOULDJA?"

And to Matt's credit, he added that Brett Favre's family was still in his prayers.

Coming in via dogsled was this from Minnesota:
"I'm not from Philly and don't really like them either (I'm from Minnesota, and not a Viking fan either, so don't bother!) but I was still happy to see you guys lose, and even happier that you were so rude and obnoxious to the Philly guy that you and your column now look absolutely silly and he looks like a genius. It's as bad as Matt (Hasselbeck) declaring for all to hear, 'We want the ball and we're going to win!' Talk about eating crow!"

And, of course, now that the column's past, it's time to rehash the game: "Dear News-Chronicle," writes Wade of Warminster, Pa., "The Cheeseheads have a football team full of Boneheads. ... Note to Milli Vanilli (Al Harris and Mike McKenzie): you guys aren't paid to grow dreads, you are paid to make certain that an opponent doesn't pass itself out of a fourth and 26 hole. Pathetic."

And with that, winter descends upon Lambeau Field.

Squeeze Every Drop from Lambeau We Can

March 12, 2004

Recently, a columnist for another newspaper in the area (there's ANOTHER one?) suggested that it's a good thing those snowmobile races were niced out (well, they weren't rained out or snowed out) of Lambeau Field and into the parking lot because "America's most famous football stadium" should be reserved for just that.

As Howard Dean once said, "that's a bunch of hooey."

First off, I didn't know it was such a bad thing to have a sports event inside a facility built to house - gasp! - sports events. Seems to me that's the one thing that SHOULD be in Lambeau Field.

Just because it isn't 11 overpaid behemoths arguing over a hunk of inflated material doesn't mean it can't go in there. And if they can't get the turf in shape by July after an event in March, they need new groundskeepers.

Besides, that's far from the worst thing they could do in Lambeau.

The old site of Crosley Field in Cincinnati was used to park impounded cars after the Reds moved to Riverfront Stadium. The Rose Bowl - which I always

thought was the most famous football stadium - holds flea markets in the parking lot.

And goodness knows, the inside of Lambeau's atrium has welcomed weddings, a baptism and even Green Bay's 150th anniversary dinner. If politicians don't tarnish the stadium, I don't think a few snowmobiles will.

If anything, Lambeau isn't being used enough. During the off-season, the goal, I believe, should be to have one event a month. And at least these days, somebody is trying.

Time was when you expected to see other things at Lambeau. St. Norbert College and Fordham played there in a charity game for a Vince Lombardi scholarship. They've held high school championship games there.

Indeed, in its first few years, the local high schools played their biggest games there, until Lombardi got mad when they played one rainy night and tore up the turf.

Which, of course, is the problem. When Lambeau was built, the Packers might play six games a year there, at most, with a couple contests a year being played in Milwaukee. Now, it's 10, not counting any playoff games.

And many more of them are in December, meaning that if the ground is going to have any grass left, care must be taken in the preceding months. Since then, it's been quiet, which is ridiculous. What's wrong with a big ol' concert, a snowmobile race, a fireworks display?

Lambeau is an underutilized gem, something to be proud of.

It's also a burden on the taxpayers, and events like this will lift that burden. There should be more of them.

By the way, my sympathies to the snowmo organizers, but that's the risk you take holding an event in March in Wisconsin.

They should have waited until this coming week. Everybody knows there's always a snowstorm around the time of the state basketball tournament.

Lazy Afternoons Watching Others Sweat

July 22, 2004

I'm not sure when I attended my first Green Bay Packers' practice, but it was probably when I was small. I do know it was during the Lombardi years, for I remember seeing Bart Starr (wearing No. 51) and Don Chandler, so that would put it in the 1965-67 era. In those days, it wasn't as special, it seemed, unless you were a kid.

For in those days, practices were open all year, even into December, with maybe a practice just before the game held in Lambeau Field to keep the curious away.

There wasn't a time limit on seeing your heroes up close and personal. The fence around the field was a low rail, not wire. There was no huge building in the background, just a rickety camera tower between two fields.

There were kids, of course, always kids. They're always the most insistent about the autographs, and still are.

But back then, it was an icebreaker, a way for a boy to have a reason to approach Mr. Packers Player. For the big names, there were small lines; by the time I was there, Starr was an expert at herding kids into some sort of formation.

But it's always been a draw, and still is. Even with the fence ... and the restrictions ... and the players diving into cars to avoid the crowds.

Granted, it's a different world today. But there are still enough players who make that walk every day, still ride the kids' bikes, still sign the autographs.

I must admit, my experience has been limited to Green Bay. I never attended any of the other Cheese League camps, while they were operating. I was usually too busy up here.

And, truth to tell, watching a football practice has never been my idea of great entertainment.

Sure, it's fun to see the behemoths up close, to watch them react to each other. And, if you are close enough, it's a revelation to realize the sheer speed at which pro football players operate, even at the lesser demands of practice.

I will never forget the first time I watched Reggie White in practice. I had covered the Packers for some time, and had never, ever seen anything like the moves and quickness White showed. And I wondered just what it must be like to have to stop this guy with the game on the line.

Maybe that's why the crowds show up at training camp every year. Not for the autographs and not for the sunshine. (It certainly isn't for the creature comforts.)

But at a time when sports are becoming too expensive for the average fan to experience in person, it's the one month of the year when anyone can experience - for free, and at close range - something of what it is like to play professional football.

One wonders how long it will last. The Washington Redskins' owner - and may he end up frozen; I forgot to include him last week* - tried to charge \$10 a head. I'm surprised other teams haven't tried. Or even sold close-up viewing space, leaving the other fans distant.

I don't think there's a similar experience in sports - getting to see players doing their jobs for free.

Even if all that's going on is punting.

(*) It was shortly after Ted Williams died and his kid put him in the cooler. I followed with a list of people I'd dearly love to see frozen - NOW.

Dear Folks:

September 17, 2004

Well, your Green Bay correspondent is still here, and I know you want to know all about the Packers. Let's be honest - we all gave a big sigh of relief Monday night (or Tuesday morning if we fell asleep during a John Madden monologue) that the Packers may actually show signs of being as good as fans think they are.

After a preseason in which the Packers showed as much strength on offense as Bob Lorge* did in the Senate primary, it was good to see that when the games counted, Brett Favre and his crew were actually able to put the ball in the end zone more than once in a 60-minute span and that the defense hadn't been outsourced to India.

So all is well in the world again, and the Packers will finally get to play at home, against their longtime rivals, the Chicago Bears. Admittedly, this hasn't been much of a rivalry. The Bears have been as successful against the Packers recently as a Democrat trying to get air time on Fox News.

They also have a coach named Lovie, which is a perfect football name, right? Consider this: In the past few years, the Packers have had coaches named Mike, Ray (now there's a great name), and Mike. Maybe when Sherman goes, I can coach for a year and then Mike Ditka will make a comeback. But Lovie? Is it possible to have a

knock-down, drag-out rivalry with a Lovie? Have the McCaskeys sold the Bears to Thurston Howell III?

Ah, but it's easy to make fun of our old friends, the Bears. After all, aren't they the team that's sponsored by a bank? (Apparently, their quarterback was repossessed by the bank and was sold at auction). And aren't the Bears the team that has a stadium that looks like the scenery from "Star Wars" and "Gladiator" got mixed together?

That hasn't beaten the Packers since Brett Favre learned how to spell his last name?

You look at the Bears today, and the only player anyone knows is Brian Urlacher, who received less press for his play last year than for his playing around with famous clothes hanger Paris Hilton. Somehow, I can't see any of the Packers making the papers for dating a skinny supermodel.

And there is excitement for the first game that counts at home. To be honest, spending \$50 to watch one series of Ahman Green and three quarters of 22 guys named Dermatitis Lotrimin is not the best way to spend an evening.

It looks like the stadium has held up under the wear and tear of those 11 home games last year, despite attempts after the last regular season game to tear down the statue of Curly Lambeau and replace it with one of Nathan Poole. Remember him? The guy who saved Green

Bay's bacon? Well, it's a good thing all those snowmobiles never got in there, as the stadium looks just fine for this season.

So there is excitement here. Even the Krispy Kreme down the road - yes, we've been dragged into the doughnut world of the 21st century - is selling doughnuts with green and gold sprinkles. Game day only, of course.

Wouldn't want anybody to think we're obsessed with the Packers or something.

I mean, it's not like people here would vote against a presidential candidate just because he got the name of Lambeau Field wrong. And I have to admit I was there when John Kerry said it and didn't think anything about it. For one thing, the airport in St. Louis used to be called Lambert Field, and it's a slip of the tongue a well-traveled person could make. For another, I've seen a lot of politicians trying to get in with the locals, and it always rings false, so when one of them slips, it's not a surprise to me.

I can think of a lot of reasons to vote against John Kerry (and a lot of reasons to vote against George Bush, for that matter), but voting because someone screwed up a name in an attempt to seem local is just silly.

Of course, Green Bay, silly, and football season go together on a regular basis, don't they? See you at the

stadium, whatever its name is.

(*) Robert Gerald Lorge is a chronic Republican candidate, who from 2000-2010 ran a variety of underfunded and unsuccessful campaigns.

The Game Times, They Are A-Changin'

December 3, 2004

The item was a brief one, issued Monday before the Green Bay Packers played St. Louis. It said that the times for two December home games had been switched from noon to 3:15 p.m.

It's not the first time that it's happened, and it won't be the last.

But it's still a pain.

The reason, of course, is television, and its need to draw the big ratings numbers. With the Packers hot and apparently headed for the playoffs, their games will draw. And Brett Favre is always a salable commodity ("Sunday, it's Brett Favre leading the Packers against...").

And for the networks and players it's no big deal. Charters take off whenever they have to, and the networks drive their trucks when they have to.

Of course, one group finds itself inconvenienced -- the people who buy tickets. We don't matter.

So what if a game that could be played in warming sunshine instead ends in cold darkness? So what if you have to drive all night to another state to make it to work the next day, losing the three hours you would have had for an earlier start?

Or, for another example, so what if you've made travel arrangements to come from out of state with your departing flight leaving at 6 p.m. -- which, with the later start, will probably be the middle of the fourth quarter?

Which is what has happened to friends of mine. You may remember writing in this space about Andrew Kulyk and Peter Farrell, the "Sports Roadtrippers" out of Buffalo. Their first visit to Lambeau was for an end-of-season game back in 2001, with the flight home leaving at 6 p.m. When the game was changed to 3:15, they found themselves having to leave early.

Happily, the good folks at Austin Straubel International Airport were helpful, allowing them to check bags early and speeding them through the rental car return.

Granted, for the average neighborhood fan, it may not be an inconvenience. But for somebody traveling to see an NFL game -- and willing to plunk down bucks in the city they're visiting -- it's a pain.

Granted, the NFL is relatively conservative on changing game times.

Look at college football. A college football schedule with times is a thing of the past for a large school. In Wisconsin's case, it's a question of what network will show the game and when they want it shown, leading to start times all over the map, few decided more than a

month before the game date. Try making plans with that schedule.

And, of course, it will only get worse. New contracts between the NFL and CBS and Fox will allow the league to switch Sunday games to Monday nights* if they are deemed important enough. It won't be at the last minute - but imagine the impact on local motels and hotels of a game-day switch.

Somehow, I vaguely remember the campaign for Lambeau Field's renovation aiming at the fact that the Packers had to get more revenue out of the facility. Meanwhile, the NFL's TV policy does everything it can to keep the facility's users from being able to make plans.

So get used to it -- at least until Brett retires, at which time we can go back to the way things used to be - noon kickoffs and lame announcers.

(*) Well, that was the original plan; instead, the big network TV game was moved to Sunday night, and games only had times changed, not days. A minor victory.

Feeling Strange in a Familiar Setting

August 22, 2003

It's a strange feeling to walk into a place where you've spent a lot of your life and feel absolutely, totally out of place.

And that's the way I've felt this summer when I arrive at Lambeau Field to cover yet another news conference on the stadium's remodeling.

I have the feeling some of you might feel that way Saturday night when the Packers play their first preseason game in the new Lambeau.

I'm not claiming any special relationship with the old place. I covered the Packers for almost a decade, and have been going to the occasional game since 1967, but I know many of you have gone to many more games there. You've sat in the same seat for season after season, watching things change all around you, from a time when men wore coats and ties to today, when fans paint their faces and wear cheese on their heads. You've seen more and more drunken behavior - and occasionally less. You've seen seasons that used to be over - playoffs and all - by Jan. 1 drag on and on into February. Complete with winter night games.

You've seen the area around the stadium change. Relative newcomers are always surprised to see old photos of the construction, when Lambeau Field was a farm field,

and there were just scattered houses across what is now Lombardi Avenue. You're an old timer if you can recall the street was Highland Avenue, or that it was the main U.S. 41.

You've also seen the players change, from slightly better-paid working joes to multimillionaires, from people you see on the street to people who seem to avoid the public, from fun-loving rascals to, occasionally, criminals.

And you've seen Lambeau Field change. When the Carolina Panthers were here for the 1996 NFC Championship game, I walked through the stadium with a Charlotte TV reporter who looked around and said Lambeau looked like "the world's largest high school stadium."

And in some ways, it still does, at least from the inside. Only a few cushy seats near the top, and some fancy new scoreboards that cost more than the entire stadium did back in 1957.

Don't worry - I'm not getting all nostalgic on you. In fact, I'm still not sure that building a new stadium wouldn't have been a better idea. When one considers the creature comforts in other new NFL Halls of Worship, and one looks at Lambeau, it's a bit surprising more wasn't done in this area.

Not that it could be. They crammed 56,267 seats into a tight bowl, one where nobody was too far from the

field, one where you didn't have to climb coronary-inducing ramps and steep stairs to reach a seat more than a 10-story building above the playing surface.

Andrew Kulyk and Peter Farrell, the "Sports Roadtrippers" who have seen every major league facility in the U.S. and Canada, gave Lambeau four stars out of five in its old configuration. They're coming back in October for another look.

One thing's for sure - nobody will ever mistake it for a high school stadium again.

City Dropped Ball on Selling Lambeau Name

September 5, 2003

A recent preview of the NFL suggested that the Green Bay Packers were headed for games in “Kraft Cheez-Whiz Stadium.”

Not gonna happen, of course; the naming rights issue, let’s be honest, is dead. Except for the Green Bay City Council, which continues to beat the issue for political gain.

Let’s backtrack to the vote to remodel Lambeau Field. It was close, but it passed. It did, however, show that as much as the Packers are loved, Brown County residents are a little leery about paying millions in hard-earned taxes to prove it.

And so, a second vote was held, to see what the view was on selling the naming rights. Not surprisingly, it passed.

The problem was that it should have been done before the remodeling plan was even unveiled. At that point, much more could have been brought to the deal, including:

‰ The possibility of additional seating devoted to the naming rights buyer.

‰ The right to additional advertising.

% Most notably, the excitement that would come with the new stadium, and a willingness to start fresh with a new name.

None of that happened. Why?

First off, the Packers did introduce the stadium plans first. Second, it was a remodeling, not a new stadium, with much discussion of how everybody wanted to “save Lambeau.” Third, the issue of naming rights was not well-discussed at the time. And fourth, neither side pressed the issue until much later.

The Packers and Bob Harlan, of course, weren’t about to press it. They just needed money from outside sources, and the sales tax was the most likely way to get it.

It was the city that stayed silent. Then-mayor Paul Jadin and the City Council, if they were really interested in naming rights, should have been outspoken from the get-go, keeping the issue hot and essentially forcing the Packers into confronting the issue. They didn’t. Instead, we had a whole bunch of moneymaking schemes from the obvious (brick and license plate sales) to the failed (a higher beer tax).

Of all these, the only thing that had a shot at raising money was a sale of the stadium name. And the city didn’t press it. It even let the Packers sell the names to the different gates, a deal that let the Packers keep the money.

From a taxpayer standpoint, that was a major error.

Since then, the bottom has fallen out of the naming-rights business. (The Packers still have one gate available to sell.)*

But the city, in recent months, has finally got off its chairs and is starting to battle for a name sale. It's too little, too late.

On Tuesday, Ald. Dan Haefs got up and said that if the Packers didn't cooperate in a rights sale, the city should ask them for payment. And the name of that, dear readers, is political posturing. Look, Haefs is one of the good guys, someone who looks at every issue separately and doesn't vote with the cliques on the council, but on this, he's just wrong. It's like kicking your dog two months after he let the burglar in.

The city is to blame if it didn't get the money it wants. It assumed, wrongly, that the Packers wanted to cooperate. They didn't, and that's their choice.

And as the stadium is dedicated this Sunday, it's too late. You couldn't chisel that Lambeau name off the wall with a hundred-pound hammer.

The stadium is beautiful — not comfortable, but beautiful, like a designer chair that's difficult to sit in. The atrium is impressive, and the club areas are luxurious. The

team areas, from the photos I've seen, are likely to lure free agents for the next few years.

And it's going to stay Lambeau Field. Whether the City Council likes it or not.

(*) It was later sold.

Chapter 2:

LIFE DURING WARTIME

I started writing my weekly columns in March 2001 when the News-Chronicle added a Sunday edition; the columnist who had been running on Friday was moved to Sunday, and I took over the space.

Just six months later, four planes crashed, and we all thought things would never be the same again.

Some weren't, of course, but others are. Here are some samples of what happened from Sept. 11 onward.

From Pearl Harbor to World Trade Center

December 7, 2001

The comments started mere minutes after the second plane had hit the World Trade Center Sept. 11.

"It's our Pearl Harbor."

"This is the new Pearl Harbor."

It is ... and it isn't.

It is for the shock it engendered in America. We had not foreseen either one. We were used to gentlemanly behavior from other armies.

No sneak attacks (apparently, no one remembered Washington crossing the Delaware). And we never really thought big-time terrorism would strike here.

It isn't, because of the circumstances. It was clear that war was developing and that, eventually, we would be dragged into it. In September, we were hoping to stop war, and we did not expect to be dragged in.

It is, because it unified the country. Patriotism was in style.

It isn't, because it didn't have anyone for us to unify against, except a lone figure and his henchmen - and one gets the feeling they were just the tip of the iceberg.

It is, because we struck back.

It isn't, because we may have to strike back again and again, in a variety of ways.

It is, because it shocked us.

It isn't, because we were shocked as it happened. Pearl Harbor was far away. Many of us have been to New York or Washington; we've seen the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

It is, because we reacted by detaining the countrymen of those responsible.

It isn't, because some amongst us today have the good sense to realize that one's nationality is not an automatic indicator of guilt.

It is, because people wondered what we could do to help.

It isn't, because we were directly affected. Our airliners sat on the ground. Our streets were guarded. Our mail was tampered with.

And there is one big difference.

It isn't, because except for the Pentagon, most of the dead in the attacks were civilians, ordinary people, in offices and elevators.

And it is, because the attack on Pearl Harbor 60 years ago today made us angry. So angry that we used

every method we knew of to obliterate the enemy, up to and including the atomic bomb.

What worries me is that this time, the other side may have the desire to use it.

There is one great commonality between the two events, however, and one that should never be forgotten.

Brave people died fighting back, and brave people will die in the weeks and months to come.

We remember Dec. 7, 1941, and we remember Sept. 11, 2001.

And we should never forget anyone who died because of what happened on those dates.

A War Which Will Last Forever

May 14, 2004

It wasn't a good week to be a conservative, or a liberal, or an Iraqi, or an American.

It was a week we haven't seen the likes of in a long time ... a week in which the rest of the world could be excused for asking out of this little deal we have going on.

We're looking like deviates, and they're looking like butchers. Anybody who trends toward normality wants nothing to do with all this.

Sadly, this is the point we've reached. We are now in a war that, no matter what we do short of destroying the world, will never end.

And there seems to be no way to try. We quit, and they've won. We keep attacking, with little hope of ending terrorism, and they've won.

For terrorism isn't a government you can overthrow, a madman you can capture. It's a way of life. And it feeds on the hatred shown to it.

There have always been terrorists, in varying scale, and in causes having nothing to do with the present danger.

But if there's one thing we should have learned, it's that directly attacking terrorism only causes it to grow.

For if there is one thing guaranteed to feed terrorism, it's the killing of terrorists. Their children and their children's children grow on the hatred, and the devastation.

And we're going that way as well. We have been attacked, and we're hurting. We have been attacked in ways large and small. And, as is only human, we want revenge. We want to eliminate those responsible. But it isn't that simple, and we know it.

So we find ourselves battling a faceless enemy, making war with an idea, not an army or a government.

We do so with ideas battling at home, over whether we should support this. We find ourselves battling with those of the same ethnic and religious groups as the terrorists espouse, demanding loyalty and support.

We find ourselves at odds with countries we have been allies with in the past. We find ourselves rebuilding a country where we are not wanted, removing universally disapproved leaders and getting disapproval for it.

We have to wonder how we got here.

As if we could forget. The airplanes, the carnage, the wreckage. This, we agree, needs to be punished. But how?

There may not be a way. This may be a time when evil triumphs because good men can do nothing - at least, nothing that will make the problem worse.

And we have made the problem worse. We have taken whatever moral authority we had and squandered it because some mental midgets couldn't keep their minds and pants zipped. And just as it was about to get worse, it did - in the other direction.

An American is dead in the worst possible way, his murder taped for the enjoyment of terrorists everywhere.

And the disgust of anybody with a human bone in their body.

So for all of us, liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat, pro-war and anti-war, it was a terrible week.

We are in a war that threatens to sap the strengths that made us strong - our freedom, our sense of humanity - and there seems to be no way out.

What is the Reason For War in Iraq? Tell us

March 5, 2003

There are a lot of things H. Ross Perot has said that make no sense at all. But there is one that did.

Paraphrased, he said the U.S. should never go to war without the full support of the American people, and never without a specific, easily-explained goal in mind.

And that's something our government should remember as the situation with Iraq continues to worsen. There are times when, it seems, we are watching a rush toward the inevitable, much as one watches two cars about to crash while knowing there's nothing that can be done from the outside to stop them.

What makes this difficult is there are legitimate concerns about what Iraq may do. Don't go by what inspectors may or may not find. If there are legitimate weapons, they will not be found; Saddam Hussein may allow the finding of empty warheads, but that's a tradeoff, allowing the inspectors to claim some successes and gain some world approval.

So Iraq may be a danger. So may North Korea.

But in the history of the United States, we have only had problems in war when we strike first. Ours is a country that will fight mightily in its own defense, but has

trouble fighting as the aggressor, in attacking to defend ideals.

Americans had no trouble with the attacks on Afghanistan; we were going after an enemy who attacked us; one we still haven't found, and one many Americans want to see taken care of first before we start a new conflict.

Granted, waiting for another to strike the first blow will lead to casualties here, as we discovered on Sept. 11. Still, it lends credence to our being the world's moral leader. Put simply, we do not attack unless we have a good reason.

President Bush has not given us a good reason. Even his father could at least say we were fighting to liberate Kuwait. Having said that, he then botched the job by not stopping the aggressor once and for all.

Bush the elder passed the first Perot test — support, in general — but failed at the second, completing the mission. Bush the younger still has to earn the support.

And so far, he hasn't given a reason for support. Ask 10 different people why we may fight Iraq and you can get 10 different answers, ranging from "stopping weapons of mass destruction" to "revenge for his old man."

So what would I say to him?

Mr. President, you've got to trust the American people. This is especially true given the circumstances of your election. We will support a well-explained, well-reasoned decision, one tested by the questions of the people.

Instead, we have seen little from you except threats and calls to action. That is not enough.

Your performance was solid after Sept. 11. You showed leadership and courage. But we haven't seen that when dealing with Iraq.

Here in Green Bay, we're sending young people into the danger zone. We want — no, we deserve — to know why before they go.

The Comics Weren't So Funny This Week

April 23, 2004

If you haven't read the comics today, go read "Doonesbury," then come back here. I'll wait.

(Since you don't have the paper, I'll sum up: B.D., two days after we found out he had lost a leg in Iraq, found out himself. As a counselor was talking in the picture, saying something about an adjustment period, we hear B.D. from outside the picture: "SON OF A BITCH!")

You may have noticed something missing in the last panel.

Today, we got his reaction. And yes, we edited B.D.'s curse, although anybody who's ever seen a hole in a doughnut should be able to figure it out. Editor Tom Brooker explains:

"I'd have a hard time printing that phrase as a direct quote in a news story, let alone as part of a piece of fiction on the comics page in big, bold letters.

"Everyone will know what we 'bleeped,' and I don't think our change diminishes the horror of war that Trudeau's trying to depict. In my view, the storyline will simply be more acceptable to more people.

"It's simply a matter of taste; Trudeau is obviously prepared to cross a line, and I'm not."

Other newspapers were. "If you look down and suddenly part of your leg's been blown away, you're certainly not going to say, 'Goodness gracious!'" said Tampa Tribune editor and vice-president, Frank Denton, quoted in The Guardian newspaper in England.

Trudeau, for his part, defended what he did, especially the theme as a whole.

"It's a task any writer should approach with great humility, but I think it's worth doing. We are at war, and we can't lose sight of the hardships war inflicts on individuals."

Our handling was mild. At least one newspaper, citing "graphic violence," and the recent death of a soldier in its small town, dropped the strip until the immediate storyline ends.

We'll probably hear from some of you that "comic strips" should stay out of such issues and seriousness. It's where you go for a break. Still, it's typical territory for Trudeau, whose strip is easily the most political around.

And his fans wouldn't want it any other way. As always, taste differs.

What was interesting is that, over at the other paper, Darby Conley's "Get Fuzzy," mostly a vehicle for surreal animal antics, got serious in the same week, with the human character's cousin also losing a leg in the fighting.

Conley has kept the victim offstage, so to speak, and concentrated on the fact that casualties seem to be brought in almost in secret. (Conley hasn't publicly commented on his series.)

Which brings up another irony for us.

Today's changed comic and the two stories about wounded soldiers come at the same time - and in this case, the same day - as we carry stories about the return of the 432nd Civil Affairs Battalion to Green Bay.

And it comes just days after two of our local men lost their lives in Iraq.

The war is coming home, more and more. And it's going to affect us in ways we can't imagine, ways that make a little intrusion in the comics pages seem tame.

It's funny - there are people for whom seeing a character in pen and ink lose a leg will bring things home faster than all the news reports out there.

By the way, if you want another local connection, there is one. B.D., as veteran readers of Doonesbury know, played quarterback in college. He was named by Trudeau after Brian Dowling, Yale's star quarterback at the time.

And Dowling played briefly for the Green Bay Packers in 1977.

All, Nothing Has Changed Since Last Bush Visit

July 14, 2004

President Bush's last visit to our area, just three years ago, seems to belong to another era, one almost as distant as the memory of Franklin D. Roosevelt's train arriving in town in 1934.

The next day's News-Chronicle, on Sept. 4, 2001, carried stories on the president's visit to Kaukauna and a getaway speech at Austin Straubel International Airport. He spoke of his tax cuts and the fun he was having leading "the greatest country on the face of the earth."

Just one week later, The News-Chronicle printed two editions in one day — our regular one, and an extra edition detailing the terror attacks on New York and Washington.

So he returns today to a changed community, leader of a changed country.

Or has anything changed?

Yes, the shadow of war and terror still hangs over us. There will be even stricter security for the president's campaign appearance today. His speech will undoubtedly contain plenty of references to that.

But it will still contain plenty of Packers references — the over-under is three — and upbeat assessments for it is, after all, a campaign visit. There will be no policy

statements, just an urging to voters to stay the course and to supporters to do all they can for victory.

But those will come in a week when the president's advisers are floating a plan for delaying the elections in case of a new attack. This from a country that ran elections not only in two world wars, but during a civil war as well. Are we that insecure now?

All I can think of is the old W.C. Fields line: "I always carry a bottle of whiskey in case of snake bite ... and to be on the safe side, I always carry a box of snakes."

When the president arrives today, keep an eye out for the snakes.

We must fight terror, for it is fighting us. But are we any safer than we were three years ago? Maybe from Saddam Hussein — if you believe he was a threat, for he certainly had enough time to do something — but certainly not from other terror groups. Osama bin Laden is still out in some cave somewhere, and we keep hearing of new threats all the time. If anything's being done to fight them, the government isn't letting us targets know.

If we can find Saddam in a rat hole, why can't we find Osama in a cave?

Repairing Iraq may be a noble endeavor, but in the war on terrorism, it's fighting cancer by setting a broken leg.

I consider myself one of the undecided, mostly because I don't trust John Kerry yet. But I can't trust Bush, either, for two reasons:

1. The ongoing ties of his administration's business buddies to the rebuilding of Iraq. Maybe everything is on the up-and-up, but it is too easy to see connections and benefits that aren't there. All I can think of is Spiro Agnew, many years ago, taking bribes in the vice-president's office.

2. Four years ago, Bush ran as a "uniter, not a divider." All we have seen from his campaign on television is advertising designed to poison the image of John Kerry before many voters know who he is.

I'd like, tonight, to hear the president say he wasn't going to mention his opponent, and spend his time telling us what he will do — constructively, to help the country recover from terror and economic problems — for the next four years if he's given another term.

I'd also like to hear him explain — he won't in this forum, for sure — just what the connections are between his business cronies and the rebuilding effort in Iraq, and who is profiteering.

Finally, I'd like to see both Bush and Kerry quit the race.

No, I'm not kidding. I have heard from both liberals who distrust Kerry and conservatives stunned by

some Bush moves who can't stand their own candidates. If the true believers don't like you, how can the rest of us?

Maybe it's time for these two to step out of the way, and let some real leaders — instead of two of the richest family members in America — run for office.

Sadly, that's one of the things that hasn't changed.

Someone or Other, Bless America

March 14, 2003

"And so, in a compromise, they've decided to name the new world after Amerigo Vespucci. But nobody can keep a straight face while singing 'God Bless Vespucci.'"

- 1960s comedy album

Well, somebody's got to bless America, and whaddya know, Irving Berlin chose God.

Irving Berlin was Jewish, in case you didn't know. That probably would make him persona non grata with quite a few of the folks who are pushing everybody to sing "God Bless America".

And to pray in schools, and to have government require religion.

I've written in this space before about my religious beliefs, or lack of same. I'm an agnostic, not an atheist; I don't really believe there's a God, but I'm willing to change my mind if given proof. Say, the immediate exit of anybody using religion to oppress people. Like Osama bin Laden. Or Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. Or most of the people in Northern Ireland.

But I still recite the Pledge of Allegiance - including "under God" - and would sing "God Bless America" if asked. (Though my singing could probably be used as a weapon to bring bin Laden out of his cave.)

And - in one of the most overused phrases of this entire post-attack period - I will use money that has "In God We Trust" on it.

Look, if the government wants to put a slogan on its dollar bills, I can live with it, even if I don't agree with it. The same goes for the pledge, or the song.

I know most of this country believes in a God of some kind.

The problem comes with those who believe that we all must believe, or we are not good Americans. With those who really can't get themselves to say two words of a pledge, or who don't believe you have to believe in a Supreme Being to be a citizen.

And with those who say this is a Christian nation. Does that mean you won't sing Irving Berlin's song?

It's time for those pressing on both sides to back off. Singing a song with the word God in it won't make you a believer, and pressing those who don't won't convert them.

We all have bigger opponents. Those who want to take our ultimate freedom away; the freedom to live our lives as we chose, without fear, without want. We have managed to do that, for the most part, because we have put aside ethnic, racial and religious concerns.

We aren't perfect in that regard, and times of pressure seem to bring that out. But times of pressure have helped in that regard. Many of the gains for African Americans came because of their service in World War II.

They probably didn't believe in the line of the pledge about "liberty and justice for all" because they had seen it just wasn't happening, at least not for them. But they fought. And they loved their country, despite their lack of full admittance to its goals.

Finally, the rest of us listened.

Maybe those pressing on both sides should listen to another patriotic song that includes God's name.

"And crown thy good with brotherhood / from sea to shining sea."

Just Wake Me When This Year Is Over

December 28, 2001

Could we have a do-over, please?

I mean, we've really had a cruddy year here.

I was reminded of that again and again this week as the wire services started to run their year-end stories, suitable for filling holes on the news-less days between Christmas and New Year's Day.

Of course, all was overshadowed by the events of Sept. 11, which will shadow this year as the Kennedy assassination shadowed 1963. That alone would have marked 2001 as a terrible year in anyone's psyche.

Add its aftereffects - war, economic problems, travel disruption and the general unease we have all developed - and it is a once-in-a-century event. (Good thought: maybe we're getting the stinker of a year out of the way early.)

But this year was no winner even before Sept. 10.

Start with the aftermath of last year's election; add in the early weeks of the Bush administration, hardly a confidence-builder; then throw in Gary Condit, the woman who drowned her kids, and so on.

Hey, it was even a stinker personally; my mother died; my faithful Geo Metro collapsed, and I had to have another root canal.

And all of that before Sept. 11.

Let's see ... 17 more days to go. Lord only knows where that bozo bin Laden is. The Israelis and Palestinians are about to quit shooting and blowing up each other and really go to war. The economy still stinks.

And there's no snow.

We were, of course, supposed to be flying Pan Am to the big round space station by this time, or so wrote Arthur C. Clarke (with a little visual help from Stanley Kubrick). Well, we got partly there.

There is a space station, and there has been one tourist up there.

But the feds want to cut the funding again, apparently believing that money spent on space is left there, rather than realizing the money is spent down here, on jobs and improved technology.

And Pan Am folded years ago, brought down in large part - ah, the full circle - by terrorists. (Remember Lockerbie?)

Yes, I know, count the blessings as Christmas approaches; another good year in on the marriage; a bit of weight lost; the News-Chronicle still driving the other guys crazy just by existing. A plaque on the wall back in February.

But let's face it - we're all going to remember 2001 for one reason.

And we can never forget it.

Chapter 2:

GREEN BAY - THE WARMEST CITY ON EARTH

Here comes the part of the book that will be of no interest to anyone south of Wrightstown.

Green Bay, where I wrote all of these pieces, is a lovely small city which has gone through changes. In the 1960s, before the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay opened, any African American was immediately believed to be a Packer player.

Now, there is a large Hispanic community as well as a black population - although you're still going to see mostly white faces.

The local politicians aren't graft-lovers at the big-city level, but they can gnaw a meaningless issue to death.

We have several bridges, a reformatory across the highway from a state park, and enough frozen custard to fill Lambeau Field.

And we do get loopy about things other than football.

Something's Funny, and Maybe it's Us

August 7, 2004

The folks at a major greeting card manufacturer - I won't mention its name, but I'm sure it's in the card Hall of Fame (wink, wink) - sent out a release this week saying the Green Bay-Appleton area was ranked 23rd among America's funniest cities.

I am not joking.

The card company hired a market research firm that ranked cities based on sources of humor, responses from individuals who think of themselves as being funny, and - the kicker - the average sales of this company's funny greeting cards.

Obviously, we would have ranked higher if not for all those grumpy folks in Appleton who never send you a card for your birthday. But that's beside the point. Green Bay is tied with such cities as St. Louis, Detroit and Lafayette, Ind. Apparently, there's a lot of humor in the Rust Belt. (Milwaukee was fifth, Madison ninth.)

No. 1? Mankato, Minn. That's also the site of the Minnesota Vikings' training camp, which explains a lot of the laughter.

Of course, they also ranked the least-funny cities. Harlingen-Weslaco-Brownsville-McAllen, Texas, is apparently nothing to laugh about. Unless you're an

armadillo watching another armadillo being run over.
That's comedy!

The greeting card company suggests the high ranking of such states as Minnesota, Wisconsin and Montana may show that you have to have a sense of humor to deal with our weather. (This comes from a company based in Kansas City, where Satan goes when it's just not hot enough during the summer.)

Speaking as something of a Green Bay humorist - at least my wife laughs at me every day - I suppose I should be honored.

And you do have to have a sense of humor to live here.

But my belief is that this survey may just reflect the election. Everything else does. As a "swing state," we're getting to see more of the presidential candidates than most others. That has to be making us laugh.

In fact, the best commentary on the election has come not from pundits, network commentators or political science professionals.

It's come from a little Web site done by two brothers, who have put together a parody of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." Photo cutouts of President Bush and Sen. John Kerry dance around and insult each other as "a liberal wiener" and "a right-wing nut job." Sadly, they've summed up this election in about

three minutes of computer animation. (If you haven't seen it, it's at www.jibjab.com.)

Let's face it; we've got two candidates who are nothing more than walking caricatures. Both are so busy trying to make political points against each other, they haven't told us what they're actually going to do. And even if they did, you couldn't trust them to do it. And one of these people is going to run our nation for the next four years?

That doesn't make you laugh, it makes you cry.

*Council vs. Council Over the Feathered
Watchamacallit*

September 24, 2004

It seems like once a year, the Green Bay City Council manages to get itself wrapped up in an issue that any normal governmental body could handle in three seconds.

Last year, it was the saga of hot dog carts downtown. This year, it's a sculpture. Ald. Chris Wery has tagged for all time with the name "The Feathered Watchamacallit."

The sculpture, an abstract piece by artist Richard Taylor, was the result of a commission by the Northeast Wisconsin Arts Council for a piece of public art along the Fox River walkway downtown between Walnut and Main streets.

For a variety of reasons, the City Council is balking. This seems silly. But the Arts Council hasn't handled the situation well itself.

So, as so often happens, we have two groups talking right past each other, and nothing is being done.

Let's start at the beginning. In the past, the city and Arts Council have worked together nicely, with the city voting to give the Arts Council federal block grants,

used for neighborhood improvements, and the artsy folks picking art and putting it where suggested.

And that was to be the plan this time. The only problem was that an election got in the way.

The Arts Council met with the city's Park Committee before the April election and got approval to find an artist and commission a sculpture using criteria the city helped design. Among them: the sculpture had to be able to be moved if needed if the land where it would be placed was needed for riverfront development.

The City Council added other rules: The work had to be durable (it would be outdoors, so cardboard wouldn't work) and done by an artist with experience in such things. Yes, for a new artist, that's sort of like the old line about "how can you get experience if you can't get a job," but that's the rule.

So the Arts Council sent out notices and got several submissions. Only one met the criteria - Richard Taylor's pyramid of geometric shapes, topped by a feather, inspired, he said, by seeing what was around the site.

It was when the Arts Council brought it back to the Park Committee that things got interesting.

The committee had changed, with Guy Zima and Earl Van Den Heuvel on board. Zima has been the City Council's house curmudgeon for many a year, and if Van

Den Heuvel was offered a free pass to the circus, he'd ask if there were any hidden costs.

Neither liked the sculpture, and voted against a quick OK for the downtown site, asking to see other options.

Problem is, there were none. Only the Arts Council did a lousy job of explaining it, and City Council members who might have voted their way were offended. Maybe it's unfair, but they were.

The site was granted, barely, but Van Den Heuvel, apparently thinking he could have things both ways, decided to reconsider on the grounds that he thought he was voting on spending city money.

If so, he was the only one. Most people understood all the vote was for was to allow the art to be put on city property. But it got brought back.

And the Arts Council almost blew it again. It prepared brochures showing the other finalists, explaining the process and emphasizing Taylor's art was the only one that qualified under the standards set.

But they forgot to ask for a chance to speak, and after complaining, started speaking - without handing out the brochures that would have done a great job of explaining their side.

It all reminded me of a comment by former astronaut Michael Collins, in his book "Carrying the Fire." He admitted that astronauts weren't the most talkative of people, and that an Apollo crew of "a priest, poet and philosopher" might have done a better job of transmitting the experience to folks back home.

"However," Collins added, "they would probably emote all the way into the atmosphere and forget to push the circuit breaker that allowed the parachutes to open, allowing them to land."

In short, beauty is fine, but you've got to have some other skills as well.

Small Park Celebrates UWGB Founding Idea

October 20, 2003

As spots go on the bay shore, it's small compared to Bay Beach Park or Bayshore Park. But a small spot on Nicolet Drive has a unique claim - it not only provides recreation but a salute to an idea.

There always seems to be someone at Communiversity Park, just down the street from the main entrance of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

There isn't much there - a few picnic tables, park benches, trash barrels and a few spaces to park - and the facilities are porta-potty primitive.

But it does offer something rare - a spot to stand in relative quiet and listen to Green Bay.

A chance to listen to waters lapping and watch birds flying. A chance to find a stone and plunk it into the drink, or perhaps see a fish leap off shore.

The location was the site of a supper club before it became a park. The Riviera Supper Club was there before the construction started on the UWGB campus in the late 1960s, but it was torn down.

In the early 1970s, UWGB started to purchase land along the bay, including the old Riveria property, and decided to make it open space.

But any park needs a name, and instead of picking an individual, the university picked an idea.

One of the founding themes of UWGB was "communiversity," a coined word defined as "a socially-responsible university relating to a socially-responsible community." The word isn't used much any more, but it was one of the favorite descriptions of UWGB's relationship to Green Bay.

The UWGB-based public TV channel, WPNE-TV Channel 38, even carried a short-lived half-hour program, "Communiversity Beat."

While the word has fallen out of disuse like a 1970s leisure suit, the park remains, and it's probably as basic an example of campus and city common ground as one can find.

The park is nearing the end of its season; it's only open from April to October, from 10 a.m. to dusk daily.

But come the spring, it will again be a place to relax just a few yards away from a busy campus.

Phat Dogs, part one

July 11, 2003

The things you have to do to get a hot dog in this town. Like sit through meetings of the Protection and Welfare Committee, something that few of us would relish.

Frankly speaking, they're a bore. You sit on your buns, listen to speakers who aren't even in the ball park and watch committee members try to ketchup with the material.

All right, so this column is beginning to sound like it's being written by Oscar Mayer. But the city is in a pickle.

There are a lot of people - eligible voters, folks! - who really like those dogs after a hearty night of imbibing.

That, apparently, is the time that Phat Dogs does its best business.

(And yes, there are two other vendors, Top Dogs and Holy Smokers, but Phat Dogs has a funny name and has been the lead dog in this whole event. So they get dog-tagged with the headlines.)

What's really funny is that until a few months ago, most folks couldn't have told you the difference between Phat Dogs and wiener dogs. But a few complaints later, it's a major city issue.

And a silly one, of course; it's just a matter of nonplanning by the city for such urban items as food vending carts. So now an ordinance is being written on the fly - never a good idea.

And the City Council is covering itself with something less than Grey Poupon in trying to deal with it. After the committee and the council heard from one police officer - one! - that the dog carts were making a contribution to an apparent brawl-filled Washington Street, it couldn't cut back operating hours fast enough.

This is like trying to stop speeding by taking away sidewalks.

Folks, there were bar brawls in Green Bay before the hot dog was invented. (The National Hot Dog and Sausage Council's Web site says a German immigrant sold them, along with milk rolls and sauerkraut, from a push cart in New York City's Bowery during the 1860s. And you know those crazy lumberjacks were brawling around here before that.)

So maybe the carts allow a few more people to hang around downtown after the bars close, and maybe that leads to fights.

There's also the possibility that the carts calm down some fights and help avoid other problems by keeping extra eyes on the streets. At any rate, it seems to be a wash.

And is that enough to take away someone's business, which owner Jon Castrop says would probably happen if the early curfew becomes a permanent part of the ordinance?

Simply put, that dog won't hunt.

Now, there are concerns. Regulation is needed, and limits as well. Obviously carts shouldn't set up in front of an open restaurant; they shouldn't block traffic; they shouldn't leave a mess. And the city, which is providing the area for the carts to operate, deserves a cut.

But the way this has been handled shows city government at, well, its worst.

Instead of a reasoned, calm debate, it's been all beef. The city first ignored the situation for several years, then rushed to change things after complaints. In doing so, they alienated another group, the hot dog consumers.

And they took the word of one officer in cutting off the business early instead of hearing both sides. Somehow we think another weekend or three while the debate went on could have been handled.

So maybe this will come to a good end. One thing is for sure: With all the free publicity it's getting, Phat Dogs is on a roll.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm getting hungry.

Phat Dogs, part two

July 18, 2003

I was talking to another reporter the other day about the lack of interest young people have in news in general.

We agreed that, for one thing, they just weren't interested in the government and political issues that take up a lot of the news.

And you can't blame them, especially in Brown County, where the Pokey Oaks Kindergarten - excuse me, the Brown County Board - continues to amaze with its dim grasp of the rules of etiquette, much less Robert's Rules of Order.

Let's face it, if Green Bay was named Paradise on Earth, the vote on the board would be 13-12, with one abstention. And the debate over the Mental Health Center may be the closest we ever come in real life to seeing the lunatics run the asylum.

Once in a while, though, there is an issue that gets them involved - say, the right to keep a great white shark in the bathtub as a house pet. Unfortunately, this time, it's ... Phat Dogs.

Now, there's a major issue here - the right of small business to operate against the police desire to keep order

in a bad situation. Unfortunately, the police solution is to get rid of the small business.

Even the police say that the vendors aren't the problem. The problem is that people congregate downtown after bar time, and many of them are - gasp! - drunk.

This is not a new problem. Somehow, I think that the lumberjacks who frequented Green Bay in the 1800s didn't stop at one beer, or even a frozen daiquiri. And I have a feeling many of them were aggressive when they finished. At least the ones who hadn't passed out.

Now, in dealing with this, police are saying they are trying to think of new solutions. They compare it to a fire, which needs a "triangle" of events to get going - oxygen, heat and fuel. Take away one and there's no fire.

In the case of downtown, the triangle is alcohol, crowds and loitering. You can't take away alcohol; that's been tried before. And Green Bay desperately wants crowds downtown to fill its coffers and keep its downtown busy at night (something it could have achieved by putting the Resch Center where the transit garage was, but that's beside the point).

So they want to stop the loitering. They can't, however, because of the hot dog carts, which give people a reasonable excuse to stand around.

The problem, however, is apparently only when the bars close, and the drinkers all come out on the streets at once. Which brings me to a simple, elegant solution.

The community policing solution requires out-of-the-box ideas. When young people began milling around to flirt with each other in one area, police used unflattering lighting to scatter them. (They probably went to raves or started getting nasty in cars, but that was a different problem.)

Or, in Canada, after a failure to get bars to switch to glass bottles to cut down on broken glass and cutting incidents, they brought in safety glass bottles, which crumble into little round pieces.

So what's the idea? Tranquilizers in the dogs?

No. Just look at the problem. They have fights and disturbances when people come out of the bars, right? So ... don't close the bars. Let 'em run all night. After all, the people who aren't there to get drunk will leave.

And those who do will get good and drunk and likely will lie where they fall, unable to fight. Sunlight will chase the rest away.

Oh, sure, we'll have some more drunken drivers and maybe the occasional fatality, but those are easier for the police to handle, which seems to be the priority here. It's easier to take a dead body in than to break up a bunch

of fights between people who can barely make a fist, much less swing one. No idea is perfect.

But at least you won't have crowds streaming out at 2:30 on a Saturday morning.

Just Another Battle in the Teen-Adult War

June 29, 2001

It's one of my beliefs that if you took a national poll, a vast majority of those responding over the age of, say, 25 would happily lock up everybody on their 13th birthday and keep them behind a wall until they turn 18.

Adults have always treated adolescence as a disease, one to be fought, preferably, by quarantine. Kids just wanna have fun; the adults just wanna avoid the kids.

Take the recent flap over a proposed ordinance in Green Bay that would close all-age events at 10 p.m.

(Random thought here ... is Lambeau Field an all-age venue, and how would ABC react if the cops shut down a Monday night Packers game at 10 p.m.?)

The concern among some people is that the ordinance is targeted at an alternative-rock hall, Rock 'n' Roll High School. The club doesn't serve alcohol.

Lt. Mike Nick of the Green Bay Police Department said at a city hearing on the ordinance that part of the intent was to stop incidents such as one arrest of a 25-year-old man smoking marijuana with a 15-year-old girl.

Folks, that ain't the club's fault. There are problems there that go a lot deeper than the mixing of ages, or a late Friday night.

But instead of dealing with those problems, the move is to shut the lure. And, incidentally, take away yet another alternative for pre-adults to enjoy.

Nobody seems to want them. The mall doesn't want them hanging around. The cops don't want them on the corners, or cruising in their cars.

But where are the alternatives? Varsity sports? Hey, not everyone's a jock. Skateboard parks? Ditto. Not every teen is auditioning for a Mountain Dew ad.

So why not a club with the kind of music teens like? Well, you might get adults there. Surprise! You also get adults at the ball, at ball games, at movies, in life.

Blaming the club for problems outside it is ludicrous. The people involved would have found another way to get into trouble. That's what teens do. They push the envelope in ways that make their elders crazy. They do things they shouldn't because they don't know better. And there are some things they just have to learn by themselves, instead of from a lecture from a teacher or preacher or parent or cop.

And they want to be with each other, not with Aunt Harriet at their third cousin's reception with a bad easy-listening combo.

Adults can't stand that. They see teens together with other teens as a thread. One store owner complained

that people avoid his store when they see teens in the parking lot.

Well, if it isn't time for alternative rock, it's time for alternative thinking. To its credit, Green Bay's powers that be are at least offering to listen.

To them, and to the teens who don't want a favorite place closed, I say "keep talking." More important, keep listening. Just because they aren't the same age as you doesn't mean they don't have good ideas.

And I'll let you figure out if that last line was aimed at the teens or the adults.

Four Hours in the Life of 31 Bravo

March 3, 2003

Last week in this space, I told of contact with the Green Bay Police Department — a speeding ticket.

This week, I saw police work from the other direction.

As part of a story that ran earlier this week on the dangers police face and how they train to fight them, I rode along with Officer Scott Asplund of the Green Bay Police Department.

This time, unlike my previous police experience, I had my seat belt buckled.

Not that it was dangerous — I was under strict orders, stay in the car if it got hairy, and if there was a pursuit, I'd be let out at a safe place — but one never knows.

There's a universal curiosity about police work. One of my favorite stories is of the time I was covering the pro football strike in 1987. As players picketed outside, one's eyes lit up at the police presence.

"Is that a paddy wagon? Can I look inside?" the large linebacker asked, like a little kid.

So we're all curious. Maybe it's the guns and cool equipment and the license to drive really fast if you have to. Maybe it's too many TV cop shows.

Monday's four-hour ride was nothing like that.

Granted, we did get to run, with lights and sirens going, 60-plus mph across the Tilleman Bridge. Once. And, happily, it wasn't for a really dangerous situation. A woman had threatened to kill herself but was eventually taken to the hospital in handcuffs for treatment.

The rest of the day? It was pretty quiet for a Monday. Asplund patrolled the streets of the Ashland-Broadway area, eyes open, and monitored his computer.

Yes, computer. If you didn't know, most police communication is handled by laptop, including instant messaging, details on calls (and quick typing of report notes sent back to the office), even license-plate checks.

When we'd stop at a red light, Asplund would type in the license plate of the car ahead of us. All came back with no indication that anything was wrong. But if one had, it could have broken a case.

Through the computer, Asplund could check on how many other patrols were busy, check on messages and handle other routine work. The front seat was also equipped with radio (for voice communication back to headquarters) and cell phone.

The cell phone came in handy during one small incident, a dispute over a parking space at an old downtown house subdivided into apartments. Asplund was able to check the area, call the landlord, then call the complaining tenants, getting things solved as quickly as possible.

He rides by himself; Green Bay patrol officers normally do, except for training or special details. (None of that partner heart-to-heart you see in TV shows).

I also got a glimpse at a regular problem police have to face — domestic disputes. A woman had shown up at her husband's workplace, harassing him over domestic problems. Asplund and another officer got them apart, talked to cool them down and got them to agree he could show up and get his belongings.

After four hours, my time was up, and I was dropped off at the station. Asplund took the time to get equipment out of the trunk that would normally sit in the passenger seat I had occupied.

The officer was probably relieved to have something up front that could really help him.

Drive, He Said

Apri; 25, 2003

It would have been a story if Green Bay was rated, but it wasn't.

Bert Sperling, the guy behind those "most livable places" ratings, came out recently with a list of the "most drivable cities." It ranked 77 metropolitan areas on four criteria: climate, road roughness, road congestion and gas prices.

The winner? Corpus Christi, Texas, with only a few points deduction for rough roads. (Then again, where is there to go in Corpus Christi but out? No wonder the roads are clear.)

The worst? Los Angeles. Of course.

But Green Bay was not mentioned at all. (The only Wisconsin rating was for Milwaukee-Waukesha, which placed 62nd, between Anchorage, Alaska, and Rochester, N.Y.

And that's a pity. We have moments here that put L.A. to shame.

Goodness knows, I'm the last one who should comment about local drivers; just ask the fine men and women of the Green Bay Police Department. But - you know it, you've seen it - we have our share of lulus.

So let's look at the criteria, and add some comments:

Climate. Might as well get this one out of the way first. Somehow, people who can memorize the lyrics of every hit Billy Ray Cyrus had (OK, so there was one) manage to forget in just a few weeks that you have to drive slowly when the roads are slippery. We do eventually remember, but for some reason, as soon as we have our first spell of good weather, that goes away again. If you wonder why road crews use so much salt, ask not for whom the truck rolls; it rolls for thee.

Gas prices. There are times when visiting my wife's family in Georgia that I am tempted to buy a tanker truck, fill it up with gas that's about 60 cents a gallon cheaper than around here, and bring it home. It would probably pay for itself.

Road roughness. Oh, please. My wife refuses to bring her elderly grandfather up here; he'd never survive the ride in from the airport. Of course, the weather up here makes us a breeding ground for potholes and ruts; city streets have their problems as well. Getting across Green Bay medians and into some driveways requires moves that would not be out of place in the X Games. And you wonder why SUVs are popular.

Urban mobility. Basically, this refers to delays, travel times and the like. Green Bay does pretty well here - it's a truism that you can get anywhere in Green Bay in 10

minutes, whether it's Bellevue to the airport or The News-Chronicle office to The News-Chronicle parking lot.

And compared to larger cities, we do pretty well. We have a rush minute. It isn't the traffic that could hurt us in this category. It's the drivers. My wife and I plan, someday, to write a "Ten Commandments" list for Green Bay drivers. They will include:

Thou shalt take parking lot lines as a suggestion, not a rule.

Thou shalt honor the speed limit only when it inconveniences others; otherwise, go for it.

Thou shalt not signal thy turns, lest others expect you to actually make them.

Thou shalt give equal favor to all lanes, including the right one, when making a left turn. (Or in the Protestant version, thou shalt not enter the left-turn lane until the left-turn is well under way.)

And the commandment most honored:

Thou shalt not merge until thy lane ends, no matter how far back the signs were.

Chapter 4:

HITTING THE ROAD

I enjoy traveling, and luckily, I get to do some. During the bulk of these columns, I drove to Canada, and back home, and more than once, I've been to Georgia, where my wife's relatives all live.

Here are some thoughts from the road.

I Believe I Can Fly - But I Won't

October 1, 2004

This week, my wise wife and I have been getting ready for our regular road trip to see her family in Georgia.

Yes, we're driving.

Oh, we might have flown, and occasionally have in the past. It would give us more time with her folks. (Whether or not that's a good thing can be argued, but it's probably good.)

But the flights haven't been that satisfactory, and with recently-purchased wheels (a used minivan), we're ready to roll.

Flights not satisfactory? Well, let's take a look back.

Two Georgia trips ago, we flew into Atlanta. On the way back, we missed the connection in Detroit and had to stay the night.

Then, two years ago, we flew into Nashville. On every change of planes, my wife — a round-faced, friendly southern girl, with no facial hair — was stopped and gone over by the gate guards. Okay, once, I can understand.

Maybe even once on the way out and once on the way back. But after changing planes and not leaving the airport?

But we put up with it; it's the way of the world nowadays. What's strange is that she was checked four times; I wasn't checked once.

The trip down was uneventful, but the trip back ...

Let's start with the car rental. After handing back the keys, I found that we had left two CDs, purchased on the trip, in the car. By the time we got back, they were gone. Hope the folks at Cheapo Car Rental enjoy country music, the thieving (deleted).

And we had to get there several hours before the flight, or pay another day on the car rental. So it's sit around the airport time. Only laundromats are more boring, unless your idea of entertainment is the CNN Airport Network. And while we were waiting during a thunderstorm, the power went out, removing even that bit of "entertainment." (And forcing me to run around in the rain while trying to recover the CDs.)

So it's off to Minneapolis. And when we get there, it's another thunderstorm. This forces an even longer delay because the airline isn't going to send its ramp people to stand out in the rain while there's lightning around.

Good idea. But now it's nearing midnight, and my wife's job (at the time) required her to be to work at 8 a.m.

We finally took off at 2 a.m., during a small break in the thunderstorm. The break ended as we took off. I've been on Space Mountain at Disney World, the Maid of the Mist at Niagara Falls and have driven in postgame traffic in Madison, but this was the scariest trip of my life. Imagine yourself in a paint mixer with strobe lights on the inside of the can.

My wife? She slept through the whole thing, and was rather disappointed she wasn't awake enough to enjoy it.

No, this time we're driving. Which brings its own problems.

Chicago, for one. It's a nice city on its own terms, which include letting someone else drive. You can either take the tollway or ... take the tollway. Which makes one wonder where the tolls are going; no matter how bad you think our roads are, theirs are worse.

From there, it's the farmland of Indiana, which is less interesting than the farmland of Wisconsin, if only because it's Indiana. Kentucky is blessedly brief, and then we hit Tennessee.

First off, you start seeing the "See Rock City" signs. Rock City, in Chattanooga, is like Wisconsin Dells, only without the water. Then you hit Nashville, which has an impressive bunch of new downtown buildings, surrounded by huge amounts of sprawl. From there, it's

south on I-24 over Monteagle Mountain, which is a nice little thrill ride with rock outcroppings on one side, cliffs on the other, and occasional “brake failure” hills for 18-wheelers at an angle that Evel Knievel would spurn.

Finally, you hit Chattanooga, and then the short trip to her family’s town. When you consider how much time it takes to get to the airport, miss connections, rent a car and the like, the trip was probably shorter by driving.

O Canada, Here's What I Think Of You

July 20, 2002

Some random notes on a recent road trip to
Canada:

— Folks, if Illinois drivers make you mad, try Toronto. The northern parts of Ontario are OK, but hit Toronto and you'll believe a car can fly. The road signs are marked in kilometers - 88 kph equals 55 mph - and on the freeways where it's 100 kph, most of the drivers seem to be thinking mph.

And rude? We were at a Toronto intersection when a funeral came from the right and turned onto the street ahead of us. Then the light turned green for us, and all around me, drivers started moving forward, cutting through the funeral procession - marked with flags, lights on - and I could feel the glares of the drivers behind me because I stayed put.

A rare black mark on a terrific city.

— We have a tendency to think of Canada as just like the U.S., only colder in the winter. Maybe that's true in some areas, but not around Toronto.

It's a very ethnic city, with a TV channel broadcasting programs in a variety of European and Asian languages.

We were staying near York University, just next to a heavily Asian district. And downtown was certainly multiethnic.

— Safety tip: If you're ever assigned to a motel room usually used by the disabled, make sure there's an extra large bath mat. The extra room in the bathroom for wheelchairs makes it a lot easier to fall. Or ask for extra towels for the floor first.

— My wife has a new love: poutine. If you haven't tried it, it's fried potatoes covered in gravy and melting cheese curds

— Miss full-serve gas stations? They're still there along the Trans-Canada Highway between the Soo and Sudbury. Shocked us when we stopped and saw someone coming toward us to pump.

— After we left Canada, we saw a spate of news stories on how lax Canadian security is and how open its immigration policies are. It's believable from our experiences.

Crossing into the country at Sault Ste. Marie, the questioning was perfunctory: Who are you, what are you bringing, staying how long, have a nice visit.

Back in the U.S.A., it was show ID and birth certificates, more detailed questions and a longer stop. Still polite, but firm. The waits weren't long - about like a lunchtime rush at a fast-food drive through - at least for

passenger cars. Not sure how the long-haul truckers felt about it.

— You wouldn't notice it if somebody didn't point it out, but on the highway between Sudbury and Barrie, a road carved in many cases through granite, the outcroppings along the highway have little stacks of stones atop them - an Inuit native custom, sort of a talisman.

— There are two things to enjoy now that we're home. One is seeing the credit card bills come in and seeing all the stuff from Canada marked down thanks to the exchange rate. Eases the pain a little.

— The other, of course, is being home.

Leavin' On a Jet Plane

July 9, 2004

One of the good things about switching from sports to news was the fact that we don't have to fly anyplace to cover news. (Oh, there's the occasional visit to Cloud Cuckoo Land - also known as County Board meetings - but we don't have to switch planes to get there.)

In sports, of course, we'd hop on a plane to go cover the Packers in places as far-flung as, oh, Chicago, Detroit and Minneapolis. This is like being invited to a fancy-dress family reunion; you have to go, but it's all too familiar and there isn't the chance of meeting someone interesting afterward. At least, with those three cities, you got to fly nonstop. Only an hour, but no changing planes. What a concept.

Actually, we have it pretty good here. You can get just about anywhere in the U.S. with only one change of planes. If everything works right.

This is like saying you can fly to the moon if you have large enough springs on your feet. You'll never have them, and not everything works right. I realized this on the first long plane trip I took, back in college. We flew a North Central propeller puddle-jumper to Chicago, switching to a United jet for the trip to a conference in San

Francisco. Wonderful; it was on the return trip that things got funny.

We landed back in Chicago, only to sit on the ramp for a few days because there was a plane with mechanical problems stuck in the gate where we were supposed to leave. Because of this, we had about 10 minutes to get from one end of O'Hare Airport to the other. I was still on a cane from an accident the previous year, so I was out, and two of my fellow students kept me company.

And when we landed back in Oshkosh, we were greeted by the rest of our traveling party, who had come back for their luggage, which had been put on our flight.

It's been downhill ever since.

I remembered much of this on Monday while watching "Airline," a reality show on the A&E cable network. It's a documentary look at gate workers, supervisors and others at Southwest Airlines and the passengers they have to deal with. To its credit, the show presents times when both sides are at fault. But you wonder how some of the passengers ever got out of the house, much less to an airport.

Leaving aside the obvious looneys - the guy in the short velvet skirt and (maybe) no underwear, for one - the shows feature a parade of people who apparently haven't figured out that:

- The plane leaves when it's supposed to leave. Unless you're there on time. Then it won't leave. If you're late, the plane will be more prompt than Old Faithful.

- For some reason, people get rip-roaring drunk before they get on planes. Maybe they figure that if there's a crash, they'll be limp and survive.

- Normal people who can handle anything become unhinged when told they can't fly when they expect to fly.

- Airlines overbook. Don't expect to go anywhere.

Then again, I've found myself in their shoes more than once. It's not easy to be a passenger. You arrive at airports that were not built for transferring large numbers of people from one gate to another, or to have large numbers of planes arrive and depart at the same time. I know they've improved the Detroit mess, but I still don't want to go there. Chicago and Minneapolis aren't much better.

And I know that only the confrontations are shown. It wouldn't be good TV to show happy people getting on and off a plane after a nice flight with nothing but praise for the experience.

But - under the man-bites-dog theory - it would be news.

The Tiny Ship Was Tossed

June 13, 2002

NIAGARA FALLS, Canada -- If you live in the same state as Wisconsin Dells, you know about tourist traps. The natural wonder was there before any of us, but we're the ones who figured out how to exploit it for profit. Set up the souvenir stands, tours and fudge shops!

And Niagara Falls is the same, in many ways. Famous for honeymoons, it is still a favorite destination. Major hotel chains have tall towers on the Canadian side, and the signs and tall glass walls overlook the Horseshoe and American falls.

On the street, it's pure commerce. The Hershey Store, across from Planet Hollywood, connects with the Ralph Lauren store as you walk past the Hard Rock Cafe into the Casino Niagara.

Which, by the way, has a line waiting to get in. No wonder the Oneidas are drooling to get a casino up here.

All of which ignores the fact that seeing the falls is free, and Ontario has done that part quite well. Beautiful, well-kept parks line the shore well north of the falls. The park pavilions at the falls themselves are quite nice.

Stand on a sidewalk and feel the spray? It's free. And it cools you off for the next touristy attraction, or the

next purchase of "As falls Niagara, so falls Niagara Falls" T-shirts.

But to its credit, one attraction more than delivers.

There has been a boat tour of the falls for more than a century, and at the equivalent of about \$8 U.S., it more than delivers.

You walk toward the "Maid of the Mist" and are handed a blue garbage-bag style raincoat. Won't really need this, you think; a little spray on the face is cooling.

And for the first few minutes, you're right.

The boat leaves the dock and sails past the smaller American Falls, and you feel the spray, smiling and feeling a bit goofy in your blue slicker.

Then the boat starts rocking slightly, and the water grows rougher.

Gradually, you realize you aren't that close to the Horseshoe Falls yet. And you get closer, and closer...

For a little bravado, you start singing the "Gilligan's Island" music: "The weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed..."

And then you quiet down, for you realize just what you are seeing. TONS of water heading down just feet away from you. A river that is raging, rocking the boat under where you stand.

The spray is reaching rainstorm proportions. And the voice, which has been spouting statistics, signs off with a simple "Ladies and gentlemen ... this is Niagara Falls."

The boat rocks, you are blinded by the spray, and you realize the forces of nature at play. One wonders how the rocks underneath can stand it.

For several minutes, as the boat turns, you feel the breeze, the spray, and you realize you are getting water in your mouth, which you are unable to close.

And then it starts to ease. You reach down to clean off your glasses, and you can't speak.

And you step off the boat, take off your slicker -- and realize you are shaking.

Chapter 5:

ON WISCONSIN

After traveling, I come back to the state of my birth. Texas may have more characters, Florida may have stranger behavior, California may have better weather.

But Wisconsin is what it is, and its culture is finally being recognized as something unique - or at least, to be confused with "Fargo."

We're a little earthier than Minnesota, less broke than Michigan, and nowhere near as fast as Illinois drivers.

A Coin with a Cow

October 3, 2003

"The slogan on Idaho's license plate is 'Famous Potatoes.' If you drove a \$50,000 Mercedes, would you want a license plate on it that said 'Famous Potatoes?'" - Andy Rooney

And if you're from Wisconsin, do you want people to carry a coin with your state's image as a cow?

Apparently, many of us do - that was the winning design last week in an online poll. Truth to tell, none of the three designs really turned anybody on.

The one of the deer and muskie in the countryside just reminded too many people of chronic wasting disease.

Nobody really got excited about the one with the white guy selling the Indian a leaky canoe. And don't get the city folk riled up about cows.

"Where's the new Calatrava Art Museum? Where's Frank Lloyd Wright? Where, for the love of Laverne and Shirley, is something that reflects Wisconsin today?" they asked.

Well, nobody liked my idea - a coin with nothing on it, showing a Wisconsin landscape in January. But it's tough to single out something about Wisconsin. We have no Land of Lincoln, no great battles, no single industry.

Oh, we could have stood out. Maybe a coin with the tourism department's number and the saying, "For a good time, call 1-800-432-TRIP."

Or maybe a picture of a tollbooth and the slogan "Nothing like that here!"

Or a picture of Minnesota. Half of the people on the coasts can't tell the difference anyway.

It's hard for us to brag. Remember, this is the state that once had the defensive slogan, "We Like It Here!"

We do. And at a conference last week in Green Bay, state business leaders and pols looked at what a Wisconsin brand could be like.

Would it represent values? Business opportunities? Quality of life? Work ethic? All wonderful ideas that don't translate well to an inch in diameter.

So we've got the frappin' cow and so on. The least they could have done is put some ginseng on there; that's one of our better exports, but you hear very little about it.

But I'm sure it didn't fit. That's the problem with stereotypes - they're easy to shrink, because they come from small minds.

Instead, if this opportunity comes around again, let's consider a blank coin with the inscription around the edge: "Wisconsin - whatever you want, it's here."

Once Again, The Hortonville Ghost Returns

October 3, 2003

This week, the news from Hortonville is that teachers in that community had unionized after 29 years.

Hortonville ... teachers ... union. Some of you see where I'm going on this.

Actually, it was a column I had planned for next March, the 30th anniversary of the strike. I was a junior at Hortonville High School in 1974, editor of the school paper (yes, even then), and then the strike happened.

For those of you who don't remember, 84 of the 88 teachers walked out - teachers strikes were considered illegal public employee strikes in those days - and were summarily fired by the School Board. Replacement teachers were hired, and teachers from all over the state came to Hortonville to protest.

From the Web site of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state teachers union: "For those who were there the images are still fresh: picket lines made up of 500 Wisconsin teachers; helmeted deputy sheriffs bused to Hortonville from five neighboring counties; carloads of strikebreakers driving through picket lines; a tough anti-union school board; the WEAC executive secretary and more than 70 HEA supporters arrested for acts of civil disobedience. No one who was there will forget the Hortonville Vigilante Association, a small band

of idle men who delighted in harassing pickets and escorting strikebreakers through picket lines."

If you want to read more, a recent issue of *Voyageur*, the excellent local history magazine, looked at the event in a cover story.

The issue eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled the School Board had the right to fire the teachers. The issue made national news.

But to those of us who lived there, major issues fell before the daily problems. Students were home for a while, then forced to adjust to new teachers, sometimes every day.

I had one hand me his books when I ran into him downtown, saying he couldn't take any more and that I should return the books to the office.

Another dropped the N-word during a discussion about latitude and longitude and how one line designated where certain races lived.

Meanwhile our old teachers - many of them friends - marched outside, for reasons we didn't fully understand.

The school routine turned into classes - with almost no studying - a walk through the line and a run home to catch the nightly news. A town had been split.

If nothing else, Hortonville changed the views of public employee strikes. Arbitration became the rule, and there were no more strikes. (Since 1993, the qualifying economic offer, or QEO, has been the rule, to the chagrin of unions who say it is keeping raises below the inflation rate.)

This week, the teachers in the district joined the Wisconsin Federation of Teachers, the other state teachers union. The teachers had basically represented themselves in the interim; according to the Appleton Post-Crescent, the WEAC had refused recognition of any Hortonville union as long as any replacement teachers remain in the district. (WEAC officials say there are about 20.)

And nearly 30 years later, it seems, I'm doomed to hear about Hortonville. The last time I wrote about this, a few years ago, one of the current teachers invited me over to the school to hear about "the good things" going on there. And I'm sure there are plenty of them as there are at any school.

But a big part of me wants to put Hortonville, its teachers, its School Board and all that behind me.

It's been almost 30 years. Maybe it's time to graduate.

*I Can Read The Writing On the Wall - In Book
Form*

March 26, 2004

We have a poster in one of the stairwells here at News-Chronicle World Headquarters that has an oft-repeated quote about writing, along the lines of "it's very easy, all you do is sit down, open a vein, and bleed."

Which explains why so many writers look so pale.

Of course, there is writing you can do just sitting down. Or standing up, if you're a guy. No paper, just a wall.

(Editor's note: The following is not meant to encourage vandalism, property damage, or the use of his phone number after the phrase "FOR A GOOD TIME CALL ...").

Let's face it; 99 44/100 percent of graffiti should have its mouth washed out with soap. But once in a while, you see that one line that stays with you.

In my case, it was back in the early 1980s in the library at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, in the men's room: "Pope John Paul I - the patron saint of limited-term employees."

It's no accident that it was at a college. Mix educated people with too much time on their hands,

plenty of public restroom space, and - often - alcohol, and you get stuff that's often creative, often stupid.

Some of the best of both is in a new book, "Wisconsin Whizdom," the second in a series by Vicki Glembocki and Lynne Smyers. It collects a variety of writings from several Madison bars, organizing them so that comments by men and women (or at least, in their appropriate rest rooms) face each other, carrying on something of a conversation.

"It's funny," said Smyers. "It all comes down to between the sexes, a lot of boyfriend-girlfriend and men-women, showing frustration more than anything.. Some of it refers to classes, and there's not as much politics as I would have thought.

"Instead of just a collection or list, we took the step of pairing it into conversations. That extra push made it a more interesting book."

Well, book is pushing it a bit. It's wire bound with cardboard covers, and each page is the size of a single sheet of toilet paper.

The two "authors" knew each other at Penn State, and after graduation, wanted to work together some more. Smyers, the designer, and Glembocki, the writer, got the idea to do a book about Penn State graffiti.

"We sat and brainstormed on napkins - like the cliché - and came up with the idea," Smyers said.

The book became a minor hit, and they decided to hit the rest of the Big Ten Conference universities, using contacts and friends to collect the writing.

"It's fun because it's a great little gift, a stocking stuffer; it does very well at Christmas. It gets people to reminiscing," she said.

"It's almost like a tradition at some schools. No matter how often you go back, it's still there, or they keep painting it over and you find something different."

The book will be available at Madison bookstores or through collegewhizdom.com, the Web site of the authors' publishing company. Psycho Betty Books.

Psycho Betty?

"We're just kind of psycho; it's a fun name and it fits perfectly with the kind of books we want to do," Smyers said.

The Real Turning Points in State History

May 28, 2004

I'm sorry I didn't get to this one earlier. We got a release at the paper from the Wisconsin Historical Society about an online vote it's having to pick the most important events in state history.

The idea is to use the information to build an online exhibit on "Turning Points in Wisconsin History." They have an online poll at www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints where people can vote and learn more about the past.

As soon as I could, I went to the site to check out what the historians felt was important to Wisconsin history.

Much of it was predictable, and maybe a little bland.

They've subdivided it into several categories - prehistory (the glaciers shaping Wisconsin, arrival of the original residents, and so on), the early explorers, the territorial years, immigration, the Civil War era, 19th century economy, the La Follette Progressive Era, the two World Wars, the postwar prosperity and the last half of the 20th century.

Some of it just seems a bit general ("Founding of the University of Wisconsin and Other Social Institutions,"

for example), some are pretty obscure ("the General Land Office Rectangular Survey"). Yes, some are important ("Development of the Railroads," "Women's Suffrage") albeit hardly specific to Wisconsin.

Now, if we were going to pick the items important to Wisconsin, the list might be entirely different. Here are a few the Historical Society missed:

- The French arrive in Wisconsin, naming their landing point Green Bay and proving that Jean Nicolet was colorblind.

- In 1761, the first recorded "I Closed Wolski's" bumper sticker is seen on a carriage in Philadelphia.

- Wisconsin is declared part of the Northwest Territory in 1787, surprising residents who point to the west and say "what about all that land over by there?"

- In 1815, Wisconsin first hears about the War of 1812.

- Immigrant lead miners inhabit the southern part of the state and are called "moles" until somebody points out that will be a lousy name for a football team.

- In Sheboygan in 1824, in a fit of genius, an unknown man puts two bratwurst on a hamburger bun. Strangely, the hamburger will not be invented for another 50 years.

- Wisconsin becomes a state in 1848, and promptly chooses its motto: "At least we're not Illinois."

- The Republican Party is founded in Ripon in 1854. Strom Thurmond congratulates "the young whippersnappers."

- No Civil War battles are fought in Wisconsin after rebel soldiers are halted because they don't have enough change to make it up the Tri-State Tollway to Kenosha.

- In 1871, Augustus Bubbler invents the water fountain that bears his name, but because of patent suits, all other states refuse to use the correct name of the device.

- The dairy industry takes a major step forward when the use of cheese as headgear fades out in favor of actually eating the stuff. The fashion will not return for more than 100 years.

- The first bilingual education begins when classes in northern Wisconsin are taught in English and Youpper.

- In 1894, an event happens that will unify Wisconsinites as never before - George Halas is born.

- After Prohibition harms Milwaukee's breweries, state representatives try to ban suntan lotion in Florida. The measure fails.

- During World War II, an attempt is made to rename "German potato salad" "Freedom potato salad."

- In 1969, frustrated by several losing seasons, University of Wisconsin students march against the football team. This is misinterpreted by the media as an antiwar protest.

- In 1996, the movie "Fargo" confuses people on the east and west coasts who can't tell the difference between Wisconsin and North Dakota and think we all talk like dis, ya betcha.

- In 2004, Wisconsin, a state noted for unique political and educational ideas, the home of such artists as Frank Lloyd Wright, Orson Welles and Georgia O'Keefe, a manufacturing giant, is recognized with its own quarter showing ... a cow.

Chapter 6

POLITICS AND OTHER SILLINESS

In 2004, Wisconsin was a battleground state in the presidential election. Remember W? Swiftboats? John Edwards?

Anyway, it was fun to have a front row seat at the circus for a year as it kept returning to Wisconsin like a bad meatball sub. It was a lunatic year at a time of great crisis. Then again, aren't election years always like that? Change the names, change a couple of issues, and I could probably run these columns again.

As the National Spotlight Fell On Our Heads

February 20, 2004

For me, the defining moment of the 2004 Wisconsin presidential primary campaign came during Howard Dean's second visit to town, the one at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

As Dean spoke, the national press — those touring with Dean, who had heard the same speech earlier in the day — gleefully ignored the candidate for a big bag of cheeseheads somebody had left in the press area. As Dean tried to connect with voters, the reporters and photographers took each others' pictures in the foam cheese.

Well, there's another blow to the ol' national image.

But overall, Wisconsin did well by itself. Good crowds, active candidates, a few plot twists at the end — what more could you want for a soap opera?

Of course, any soap opera has some twists. Wisconsin made sure of that. And it left us all with questions.

Will John Kerry find permanent love on Super Tuesday? Did that friendly southern boy Edwards worm his way into our hearts? What will Howard do with his broken heart? And what about Naomi?

So here's our friendly analysis:

John Kerry — It was nice of Wisconsin to remind him that he isn't the nominee yet, and that he's got to show something other than electability to survive. But he did win, and considering that he spent the least time here of anybody, that's still impressive. Frankly, I don't see what makes him more electable than anyone else, and his positions haven't, it seems, been fully developed. But he managed well in his Green Bay visit, considering he had to follow Teddy Kennedy who, at age 71, can still fire up a crowd of Democrats like nobody's business.

John Edwards — An impressive surge for the guy who was the least known of the final three when the serious campaigning started here. He connected well with a strong economic message, stronger than Kerry's, and has shown some lure for moderates and liberal Republicans who can't stomach Bush's excesses. His big test is if he can lure enough money to get his message across on the upcoming Super Tuesday run; if so, and he can win a couple outside the South, he may not win the nomination but he will be able to do just about whatever he wants.

Kerry could do a lot worse than pick Edwards for the ticket (and probably will).* If Kerry wins, Edwards is young enough to wait eight years if necessary; if Kerry fails, Edwards' only concern could be whether Hillary Rodham Clinton decides to make a run in four years.**

Howard Dean — This is a campaign political junkies will study for years. Dean would have won easily if it weren't for those meddling voters who insisted on ignoring him. He may, however, have shown the way to a new layer of previously-ignored voters, and you just know more mainstream candidates are going to follow the Dean playbook in four years — making sure not to burn their bridges to the money people in the meantime.

But what really hurt Dean in Wisconsin — where he could have done well — was being wishy-washy. His “Wisconsin or Bust” statement was an all-in gesture by somebody with few chips and a so-so hand, trying to bluff. If the other hands can beat you, you're dead. But he felt he had to do something.

Then, turning it around a week later and saying he'd continue made him look indecisive at best, prevaricating at worst. Better not to have said anything at all, in retrospect.

One thing that did surprise me was that Al Sharpton never got north of Milwaukee. I would have paid cash money to see him in a \$1,000 suit on a dairy farm. Maybe he hasn't been told we actually have minorities in Green Bay.

Who would have thought he needed a lesson in diversity?

(*) He did.

(**) She did.

Multiple Monologues on the Campaign Trail

September 3, 2004

When President Bush visited the Resch Center in July, there were screeners at the gate. Anybody who did not seem to show purest adoration of George W. Bush was firmly denied entry.

The John Kerry campaign last week, instead of having a public event, had a small gathering of invitation-only supporters in a backyard, outnumbered by reporters.

President Bush is holding "Ask President Bush" events, but having only supporters at them ensures such hardball questions as "What can we do to help you win?"

The toughest question asked Kerry at his session was along the lines of "how can you prove you're for real?"

And all I could think of was the old story of the Roman emperor who traveled down the Appian Way (dodging orange barrels for the next XXVI miles) hearing the cheers of his subjects. In those days, they paid a flunky to stand next to the emperor and whisper "sic transit gloria" - all glory is fleeting.

Wouldst that we had somebody to do that today. Instead, the two men who are trying to rule this empire are seeing nothing but supporters, hearing nothing but cheers.

Nobody is challenging them to their face. Oh, sure, there are people carrying the other guy's sign standing far away from the event, a blur of red and blue, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing except opposition.

Tough questions? That used to be the media's job. But we're kept far, far away. The traveling press corps is herded like cattle into buses and pens, their cameras carefully sited to provide the best possible view of Mr. Wonderful and the appropriate backdrop.

The local press? The TV cameras get the view, the local reporters are ignored. Ask a question of the candidate? Forget it. Typhoid Mary would have better access if she were an undecided voter.

Bush hasn't taken questions from the press in months (although he did take some batting-practice softballs from Rush Limbaugh the other day). Kerry? Ditto (if we can forget Jon Stewart's embarrassingly-fawning questioning on "The Daily Show.")

Which brings us to what we have today: two men, unchallenged, basically using surrogates to call each other liars while they themselves take the high ground. It's all an illusion, all smoke and mirrors, and you, the voter, deserve better.

I admit that I don't have a solution. (Well, I do, but the Secret Service frowns on kidnapping and torture.)

Our only hope may be the debates, but those will be too formal, too practiced, with overlong questions that leave plenty of room for loopholes.

I have three for each candidate, and if they're answered, maybe I can make a decision.

For Bush:

1. You've given us too many reasons to go into Iraq - weapons of mass destruction, building a democracy, fighting terrorism. You said your "mission" was accomplished, and we've lost hundreds since then. Why, really, did we go, and what is your plan for getting out?

2. Define your health care plan in words an eighth-grader can understand. And while you're at it, explain why drugs can't be imported from Canada (and don't give me that safety garbage; we don't see Canadians dropping dead from bad drugs).

3. You said you would be a "uniter" and a "reformer" in 2000. Name two ways you have upheld each of those, with special reference to your series of negative ads and the success of Halliburton in getting Iraqi rebuilding contracts.

For Kerry:

1. What would you do if the United States was attacked again and it was discovered that a major ally had been the planning site of the attacks?

2. What can you, or any president, possibly do to recover lost manufacturing jobs? And what will you do in those states where the jobs are never coming back?

3. Name three ways you will cut government spending, if you can.

And for both:

Will you promise, at some point before Nov. 1, to sit down for an hour, shut up, and listen to real, not-necessarily-for-you voters, instead of talking?

A Political Alphabet

September 10, 2004

We finally found out this week just what level this election has reached, with John Kerry using President Bush's middle initial to say that "W stands for wrong," while Republicans responded by using Kerry's middle initial to say that "F stands for flip-flop."

Yup, it's the "Sesame Street" vote. We've got two Muppets running for office, teaching us the alphabet the way they want to see it. Well, here's our political alphabet:

A is for arrogant, whether it's Kerry's patrician ways or Bush's Texas smirk. We miss Dwight Eisenhower's honest grin.

B is for bull(feed), which is all we're getting from either side.

C is for cash, the real key to any campaign.

D is for deaths. There have been 1,000 in Iraq. There were some 3,000 three years ago tomorrow, Sept. 11, 2001. All of them are being used as political point-makers, and that just seems wrong.

E is for the economy, stupid. This probably would have been Kerry's strongest point, if he had used it instead of playing up Vietnam.

F is for football. One hopes neither of the candidates decides to stop by for a game at Lambeau Field. Traffic's bad enough already.

G is for God, who apparently is running for some office, the number of times He's been invoked in this campaign.

H is for Halliburton. Maybe it's innocent, but when the vice president's old company seems to get a lot of the work to rebuild Iraq, it sure looks fishy.

I is for issues. Some of us remember them.

J is for jobs. Are there new ones? Are they equal to the old ones?

K is for kick him in the shins and run, the favored method of attack ads.

L is for lies. We're getting them from everywhere. If candidates had to pay by the lie, we'd have this election paid for by March.

M is for minus, as in less than zero, as in deficit, which is reaching record numbers. Remember when that used to be an issue?

N is for networks, who are helping us understand the issues by running "Fear Factor" during the conventions. Granted, watching a speech by somebody

you don't like may be up there with nibbling on horse rectums.

O is for open questioning of candidates. (See last week's column.)

P is for president. No matter who wins, the country will muddle through. And don't believe that this is the most important election ever. That's still going to be the first one, when we picked George Washington and showed we could do this. And would Washington win today, with those wooden teeth?

Q is for quiet, which we all could use.

R is for running in 2008. The discussion about that starts early Nov. 3. If it hasn't started already.

S is for Schwarzenegger, just because it's fun to say. Remember when we all thought his election as governor of California meant something?

T is for Truman. One wonders why the old Chicago song, "Harry Truman," isn't getting played more this election year. Harry, is there something we can do to save the land we love?

U is for upcoming debates. Let's face it, all of this is prologue to those two or three sessions, which is where the election will be decided.

V is for voters, who, lest we forget, are going to decide this thing. If they show up.

W is for winner. No matter who takes the vote, will there be one?

X is for marking paper ballots, which after four years ago are starting to look good again.

Y is for young voters. Is this campaign turning them off from politics?

Z is for the snoring we aren't hearing. This campaign may be a pain in the butt, but you can't say it's dull.

A Convention Junkie Goes Through Withdrawal

July 30, 2004

I used to love this time of year, every four years.

That's right, I am, or was, a convention junkie. It was, back in the day, the ultimate reality television; live, uncensored, hours at a time when nothing happened but something might. Sort of like - for you modern folks - "Big Brother" with funny hats.

We've put these 3,000 people in a large arena with twice as many reporters and camera operators milling around them and balloons ready to drop at any minute. What's going to happen when they start getting ... drunk?

All right, when I was a kid, it wasn't drunk. But in those days, you didn't need to drink to sit through a political convention on TV. It was entertaining.

Of course, the big reason is that conventions are nothing more these days than the political versions of family reunions. You go every four years and see the people from across the country who believe like you do. But the reason you're there - to pick a presidential candidate - was decided long before, back in February.

It wasn't that way in the past, of course. (Man, I'm starting to sound like an old geezer.) As late as 1976, the nomination was still somewhat up for grabs at convention time - remember Ford vs. Reagan? It was a time when

procedural votes on Mondays still held meaning as a test of strength for candidates, when the picking of the vice presidential candidate didn't take place until the candidate was nominated.

It wasn't a perfect system - any system that gave us a Vice President Spiro Agnew can never be called perfect - but it was much more interesting.

Even in years when a convention had to deal with an incumbent president and a lack of drama for the nominations, there were often knock-down, drag-out platform fights. No longer, of course; everything has to be seen as unity and sweetness, all anger devoted toward the bozo from the other party.

The first conventions I remember were in 1964, when Barry Goldwater's followers packed the hall and shook their fists at the networks - a sign of the hatred the right wing still has for the media. And then the Democrats, as Lyndon Johnson tried to play down both the battle over civil rights in his own party and the outpouring of support for Bobby Kennedy.

By 1968, of course, we had the siege of Chicago, with sessions dragging until 3 to 4 a.m. as the Democrats tore themselves in two and gave the election to Richard Nixon. (A favorite memory: staying up until 3 a.m., then watching the news on Channel 5 with Don Sidney's signoff: "Meditation and the National Anthem, next on 5!")

And in 1972, more late-night follies, as McGovernites tossed Richard Daley out on his Picasso statue and nominated everybody lower than Jerry Garcia (who was pretty high in those days) for vice president, any of whom might have worked out better than Thomas Eagleton.

There was even drama as late as 1980 from the Republicans, when Ronald Reagan almost ran with Jerry Ford as his vice president, only to dump him for George Bush the elder when Ford - on live TV - got too grabby for power.

But no more. And it's affected our campaigns today. For one thing, we don't get to see people come up through the political ranks, as one might watch a baseball minor leaguer progress to the bigs. That's why we stare at modern candidates and wonder who they are.

And with nobody known, the emphasis goes to the ones with the most money, who chase others out of the game early - and make the conventions moot.

I still have a hope that someday, we'll see a meaningful convention again - a candidate becoming ill (or, heaven forbid, dying) just before the event and all of politics thrown into chaos.

Hey, a junkie can dream, can't he?

From the Battleground to the Battlefield

October 8, 2004

CATOOSA COUNTY, Ga. - After being in the middle of the presidential fight for far too long, it's a relief to be in an area where it isn't the primary topic of everyday conversation.

Oh, there's interest, of course, and there are plenty of signs here - more for Bush in conservative North Georgia, a few more for Kerry across the line in Chattanooga, Tenn. But they're almost covered over by the signs for county coroner, water commission and state representative. Local high school football games on cable TV are sponsored by candidates for county clerk. In short, local democracy is alive and well, and it's a bit of a relief.

Here in Georgia, where the state's fate has already been decided by the pollsters, there doesn't seem to be the manic urgency we've been seeing in Wisconsin. The campaign, on the whole, has been only a rumor, something followed on TV and in the papers.

And it gets front page space, but not the daily drumming that we've become used to.

It's a relief to get away from that, as it is, this week, to get away from the Packers. The Chattanooga Times-Free Press is more concerned with the success of the Georgia Bulldogs and the woes of the Tennessee

Volunteers. The Atlanta Journal Constitution is happy about the Falcons.

Oh, Brett Favre's concussion made the papers, as did Mike McKenzie's exit. But that's all they were, small items, as much a part of the day's news fodder as any other NFL headline.

And again, that's a relief. I check our Web site, and wonder just how much space is being used up there on the minutiae of Brett's head.

Instead of that, I'm following the everyday occurrences of my wife's family, from my brother-in-law's newest baby to my sister-in-law's 2-year-old, who apparently wants to be a truck driver, if truck drivers are allowed to wear diapers and go "brrrrrrrrrrrrrum, brrrrrrrrrrrrrum" with their lips.

And we brought a Packers cap with the team's starting date to her grandfather; he's got about 10 years on the football team.

And, to get from one place to another, we occasionally drive through the Chattanooga-Chickamauga National Battlefield Park, one of the larger Civil War sites in the nation. At a time when Americans are fighting and dying in the desert for a purpose we debate, it's a reminder of a time when Americans fought and died to try to save a country from itself.

There's a film at the visitors' center showing Yankees and Rebels getting together to talk over old times at the park's dedication, the feuds of the past being forgotten.

Time, the unspoken message says, heals all wounds. One hopes it heals wounds from the divisive, bitter campaign we are undergoing.

Stuck in the Middle With ... No One

October 22, 2004

You realize, don't you, that the election is only 12 days away, the city and county budgets are just weeks away from approval and the Green Bay Packers are almost halfway to the end of their season.

This, of course, means that by January, the conversation level around here will be back to the level of "cold enough for ya?"

And it will be just as well. Maybe we'll all be able to talk to each other again.

My wife and I are of differing political philosophies. (We like to think of ourselves as the James Carville and Mary Matalin of Greater Green Bay - only better looking.) But we get along, for a lot of reasons that have nothing to do with politics. Maybe it's our mutual appreciation of the wonders of Waffle House, or our shared joy in the healing power of small stuffed animals.

When we do spar over politics, it's in a teasing fashion.

Sadly, that's not the fact for the public at large. This has been the most angry campaign I have ever seen, and remember, I lived through 1968 and 1972 when candidates were shot. There is a terrible divide between the parties, left and right, rich and poor, religious and

nonreligious, pro-life and pro-choice, pro-helping government and anti-big government.

There's no middle any more.

Time was when the middle was the place to be, where politicians went for votes, where the national consensus was formed.

Now, the middle is Death Valley, empty and barren. Oh, there are still plenty of people there, but nobody's listening to them.

The politicians? They know the middle can't be counted on to vote. They know their support comes from the extremists, who vote and give them money. So their pitches are to those bases, and you see negative advertising and pitches to prejudice on both sides. You see Republican ads pitching John Kerry as a traitor and Democratic ads saying President Bush is retarded.

And suddenly you begin to long for a monarchy. At least King George III didn't have town criers running around town crying "Hear ye! Hear ye! The king is a blithering senile idiot! I'm Town Crier Steven and I approve this message!"

For those in the middle - and both my wife and I consider us residents there, rather than at the edges - it's difficult. Those who believe in balanced budgets and security but not loss of individual freedoms. Those who support troops but aren't sure that war in Iraq was right or

necessary. Those who want to help individuals but want that help to be temporary and lead to better lives.

We aren't hearing much. We're hearing about Halliburton and lesbian daughters and banning the Bible and gay marriage and ketchup and guns, almost none of this affecting us.

We're hearing candidates' backers snipe at each other about their wives, and that really bothers us.

We don't believe liberal is a dirty word, or that conservatives are automatically right-wing nut jobs.

And we are being totally ignored by the presidential candidates. There will probably be a large turnout Nov. 2 for the presidential election; this has been so polarizing an election that we'll probably have to vote, just to cancel somebody else's vote out.

But we wonder what might have happened had one of the parties had the sense to nominate somebody from the middle.

Unless there are changes in the system, we may never see that happen again.

*Don't Let the Voting Booth Hit You On the Way
Out*

October 29, 2004

Some final thoughts before we bid this election year a final, unaffectionate and long-overdue farewell:

- You knew at least one of the candidates was going to be back here one more time, and it's President Bush on Saturday. What's interesting is that he's using the Brown County Arena, and not the Resch Center. No, we don't know why. Maybe he likes the job they're doing (finally) fixing the roof.

- I'm old. They had a bunch of TV actor types at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay on Thursday, and I didn't recognize a single name.

- It's sort of sad to see Ralph Nader's campaign. He was already 25 minutes late to his appearance at UWGB on Tuesday when his driver called for directions - from Lombardi Avenue. Then, 20 minutes later, another call - from the Perkins restaurant at Walnut and Shawano avenues.* Just call his backers "Nader's laters." Seriously, this is a man who should be remembered for his amazing work for consumers - and he's going to end up as this generation's Harold Stassen.

- Let's see - John Kerry brought Jon Bon Jovi to Green Bay this week, and he's been campaigning with Bruce Springsteen. President Bush brought Wayne

Newton, although his rallies (and those of Vice President Dick Cheney) have featured recorded country music. I think the media ought to have its own band - Talking Heads.

- It's sad - and I think we're partly to blame - that the only local race that has received any attention is the dustup between Tom Nelson and Becky Weber for Assembly that focused on the mudslinging by both sides.

We've tried to fix that a bit this week with our election advances. These, after all, are the people who deal with most of the everyday issues; gay marriage, trade policy and the war in Iraq may be important, but the stuff the state Legislature does is the stuff that truly affects you.

- It was mid-December when the first candidate, Gen. Wesley Clark, hit Green Bay to campaign in the primary. That's almost 11 months. It only takes nine for a baby.

- I will admit that I totally blew what became a - well, semi-major - story in the Wisconsin campaign, one that received national attention. Yes, I was there when John Kerry said "Lambert Field." I just put it down as an end-of-the-day goof by a tired politician, something to laugh about later. I had no idea that something like that would have the legs it did.

- So when did I realize this campaign had turned into something absolutely bizarre? Maybe it was the

swiftboats. Maybe it was the mysterious Bush bulge in the back.** Maybe it was "Lambert Field." But to my mind, it was a week ago today, when I arrived at work at 7 a.m. to be greeted by a Secret Service agent, who had been there early to sweep the building for the arrival of White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card. (I don't watch "The West Wing," so I didn't know chiefs of staff got protection.) The fact that the second most powerful man in Washington - OK, third behind Cheney and Karl Rove - was visiting our old convent in an attempt to sway any votes he could through the media brought home to me just how desperate both sides are this time around.

- I was going to close by telling you who I was going to vote for. Then I got the bright idea of pretending to be undecided and trying to wheedle whatever I could from the candidates. (A ride on Air Force One? Free Heinz ketchup for life?)

Nope. Nah gah dow, as the president's dad once said. I will say this - the republic, contrary to what supporters believe, will not end if the other guy is elected Tuesday. And that goes for both sides. Sit back, take a breath, drink heavily for a day, and then deal with the fact that we still have a darn good country and nobody can take that away.

And if you're unhappy, just remember the quotation issued by former New York Mayor Ed Koch after he lost an election:

"The people have spoken - and now they must be punished."

*This is like landing in Chicago, driving to Milwaukee and asking for directions like Gary, Indiana. Had Nader had a GPS system, he might have received more votes.

**This referred to a bulge seen in the back of Bush's jacket during one of the debates, supposedly, opponents said, feeding him answers from offstage.

Forming a More Purple Nation

November 5, 2004

Let's see - four years ago, it was Florida. This year, it was Ohio. At one state a campaign, we should get through this cycle of election messes in, oh, 2204.

If there's a country left.

Folks, there's no guarantee that there's going to be a U.S. of A. by that time, the way we seem to like to tear each other apart these days.

You have right-wing nut jobs such as Ann Coulter and Michael Savage calling those who oppose them "traitors" and calling for a return to the sedition acts, making speaking against the president a crime.

You have left-wing nut jobs such as Michael Moore, trying to tell us that Iraq was a paradise before we got the notion to bomb the sand out of it for no reason.

And then, you have real people, like the ones I stood in line with in Bellevue on Tuesday morning when I voted. We stood outside in the cold, waiting to get inside to stand in line some more. And we chatted about the things people chat about when they find themselves with nothing to do. Not politics. Except to agree that we were all glad it was almost over.

There was no partisan rancor, no last-minute arguments. Just Americans, doing their governmental duty.

Not all of us were the same. There were single mothers, married couples, the old and young. There were blacks, whites and Hispanics.

Nobody there was "red" or "blue" (well, a couple of us were blue from the cold, but that was our fault for not wearing warmer jackets.)

If one of us had had a problem in line, the others would have tried to help.

And we listened to each other, something that seems to be out of fashion.

Both John Kerry and President Bush - and many of their staffers - showed little desire to hear anything that would indicate their chosen paths were wrong. Bush staffers went so far as to require signings of "loyalty oaths" to allow tickets to see the President of the United States - who, it says here, should be seen by as many Americans as time and security allow. Kerry barely talked to reporters, we are told (by the reporters), and it hurt him; he was seen as a distant figure, not someone you could talk to.

This is not the way to run a government that is of, by and for the people.

So we carry this hatred into the new year, and four more of the president. What can he do to change this?

The first thing is to listen. I suggest the president - after an appropriate interval, but before his next inauguration - put together Russ Feingold-style listening sessions, preferably in the states he didn't carry. And make them open to anyone who wants to show up, first come, first served.

Then, he should do what the session advertises - listen. To those who don't share his religious beliefs. To those who are concerned about helping others. To those facing high prescription costs who can't battle the new Medicare bureaucracy he's created. To those who can't get by on minimum wage. To those who believe there is still a place for public schools in America, rather than having tax dollars go to private schools to support a creed they don't believe in.

And I would say the same thing had John Kerry won Ohio. He would have been urged to listen to those who fear their religious rights being taken away. To those who believe the government should work to control its costs and not spend more than it takes. (Come to think of it, Bush could use that lesson as well.) To those who believe America must be stronger, and take the lead in stopping terrorism.

Red and blue makes purple - a lousy color, suitable mostly for goofy dinosaurs and the Minnesota

Vikings (there's a difference?) But it is where we have to be to advance.

And it is time our leaders started working toward that goal, rather than advancing an agenda seemingly aimed at dividing our nation.

Dear Mr. President: Where's My Check?

January 28, 2005

Dear President Bush:

First off, congratulations on your second inauguration. It's so nice to see a president with his hand on a book again, even for only a few seconds. And tell that nice Mr. Cheney - he'll remember me from that tough question I threw at him back in October - not to be all grumpy about somebody throwing a snowball at his limo. Heck, it happens to me all the time.

But I have to admit I'm a little grumpy about something, and it has to do with you. I'll be blunt, Mr. President:

Where's my check?

I mean, it seems like your administration is paying money to more columnists than my newspaper's owners - and Gannett has a lot of columnists.

A few weeks ago, we heard that your Education Department had paid Armstrong Williams \$240,000 to promote the "No Child Left Behind Act." I don't know why - hey, the thing just sells itself, like Hershey bars - but you decided to.

And he didn't feel he had to disclose that to his readers or people who saw him on TV. After all, he said, you weren't buying coverage, just hiring a production

group he owns. And we all know that a quarter-million dollars won't sway anybody's opinion, right?

And then this week, we heard that another syndicated columnist, Maggie Gallagher, wrote favorably about your marriage initiative - you remember, at least one of the participants in a marriage has to be willing to ask for directions when lost - in 2002, but failed to disclose that she had received \$21,500 from the Department of Health and Human Services to promote the proposal. (She told the Washington Post that she would have "been happy to tell anyone who called me" about the contract but that "frankly, it never occurred to me" to disclose it.)

She also said "I should have disclosed a government contract when I later wrote about the Bush marriage initiative. I would have, if I had remembered it."

I promise, Mr. President, if you sent me a check for \$21,500, much less \$240,000, I'd not only remember it, I'd keep a candle burning under your photo.

Anyway, I'm glad you haven't been all that thrilled with a "free" press.

And I think this disproves all your critics who believe you are a President of Very Little Brain. I mean, you looked at all the columnists around and managed to find two who have so little respect for their own jobs that they were willing to sell out. (I would say "for so little money" but Armstrong got almost as much as your yearly

salary. Wonder how much armor that would have bought for all those troops you keep resending to Iraq?)

But how about the rest of us? Granted, I'm out here in one of your blue states, so I understand I'm not all that high on your list.

But I am syndicated! Well, the Denmark Press runs my stuff occasionally. Still, that's two papers! I'm sure I could turn somebody around on some key issue.

Look, I understand you don't want to buy a pig in a poke. So how about a little test. I'll say something nice, and you send me whatever you think it's worth. Here goes:

"George W. Bush is the best Republican president we have seen in this millennium." There, that oughta be worth at least \$5 off my income tax, right, Mr. President?

*Please, Please Let Me Wait Until I Pick A
Candidate*

February 13, 2004

Wisconsin made its goal - barely. On Tuesday, the state's presidential primary will play something of a role in deciding who the Democratic Party's nominee will be.

But if Wisconsin's primary had come a week later, forget it.

That's the point we've reached. We're deciding in February who will be the nominee in a November election.

Why? I blame two things.

One is the need of political junkies for their next fix. After an election, they can't wait for the next one. It's like kids who want to open Christmas presents early. Soon, the 2012 New Hampshire Primary will take place the day before the 2008 election.

I'm sure the junkies are hoping that George Bush wins this fall, if only because that would give them two wide-open races in 2008. Chris Matthews, Rush Limbaugh and the rest must be slobbering like a Saint Bernard at that prospect.

And it drives me nuts. For their hunger must be fed, and there are those of us in the media who do nothing but feed it. To do so, minor items must be blown into major stories. It's political helper, in lieu of real news.

Which would be fine if issues were part of it. All I know about the candidates is what I've seen from attending their rallies and reporting on them. I couldn't tell you what John Kerry stands for right now; I haven't seen him. All I know is he gets a lot of votes.

Which for some of us is enough. But what will happen between now and November? If you think things can't change in nine months, you don't pay attention to life.

Nine months ago, we thought the war in Iraq was over. Nine months ago, we thought George Bush was unbeatable. Nine months ago, we thought the Milwaukee Brewers still had a chance to compete.

Things change, and nine months is too long to wait between picking a candidate and voting for him. There should be no presidential voting until at least July, condensed into a month before the conventions - which themselves are now ignorable.

The other reason for the early primaries, of course, is money.

States want candidates and media exposure, so they want to be earlier in the process. New Hampshire and Iowa want their traditional exposure, so they go earlier, dragging everyone else.

And we end up with a candidate being decided by people who are too stupid to move out of New Hampshire and Iowa.

Follow that with the candidates who do not win finding their money drying up quickly. Howard Dean had the top war chest; that faded quickly after he lost. Kerry wins, and he's got more cash than he knows what to do with.

It's going to take longer, and cost less, to select the new "American Idol" than the new American president.

Yeah, I'm bitter, not only about the process, but the outcome. Maybe I can warm to Kerry. But neither Kerry nor Bush promises anything new. We've got Bush, Vice President Halliburton and Bill-of-Rights-basher John Ashcroft on one hand, and Kerry, a so-so senator, and his antiwar baggage on the other.

Our country is under attack, our jobs are going overseas, and this whole election is going to be decided by who did what in the Vietnam era?

The Really Important Election is Tuesday

April 2, 2004

You've seen a lot more letters on these pages recently. As you may have guessed, an election is coming up.

And while the hypemeisters are already calling the November presidential election "the most important in our history," the one coming up Tuesday is much more important to you personally.

In November, you vote on the big issues by deciding on candidates who really aren't that different.

Tuesday, you vote on neighbors and decide the small issues - how your streets get fixed, how many policemen are in your neighborhood, whether to build parking ramps, how the county will handle health issues, where your garbage goes.

Not exactly war and peace, but it's the stuff we deal with every day.

And most of you ignore it, for many reasons. Some say they don't know the candidates. We've tried to fix that with daily profiles. Some say they don't know the issues. You should. We cover them every day.

Of course, if you're getting your information from TV, none of this will be familiar. That isn't entirely the fault of local stations; they have limited time and have to

cover an area from the U.P. to Fond du Lac, so the small items get no time. You'll only see local boards when something "sexy" is going on - a smoking ban, a racist remark, or the like.

That's why local newspapers are so important, and why Green Bay is lucky to have two. So take a moment from listening to all the blather about an election that isn't coming up until November. Come home, Brown County, and deal with the local problems at the ballot box.

Are We Headed For Another Split Country?

February 11, 2003

I lived though the 1960s once. I don't really want to do it again.

Oh, the music was better, and so were the Packers. But by the end of the decade, we had reached new lows.

It was, of course, because of the Vietnam War. Those of us who remember that time find it hard to describe what it was like — parents and children not on speaking terms, riots, protests, government crackdowns on free speech, all culminating in the Nixon paranoia that became Watergate.

I'm just getting this terrible feeling that is where we are headed again.

Recently, someone e-mailed me an article from the New York antiwar demonstrations detailing how police kept groups of demonstrators away from the rally, gradually chasing them away.

And this week, we've had the spectacle of a women's basketball player for a small New York college who turns away from the flag when the national anthem is played.

For this, of course, patriotic types have heaped abuse on her, including picketing, jeers and signs. (She's

also received some support from other students at the school.)

Let's look at this particular case, and the arguments. First, and I hope nobody would disagree, she has the right to do this. You may not like it, but you have no right to stop it.

Granted, by doing so, she's going to honk off a lot of people. And they have the right to their protests as well.

And as long as it stays that way, great. Both sides are aired, no harm done. Where I start to worry is with the "love it or leave it" crowd. You may remember them from the past — those who believe anybody showing any dissent should be shown the nearest route out of the country.

And we're starting to see some of that. The rhetoric sounds so familiar, it could have been taped in 1968 and replayed here.

There are a lot of people with concerns about this seemingly inevitable war, ranging from the morality of a first strike to the concern that we may be picking the wrong target in fighting terrorism to the basic disagreement with war at all.

These are all things that should be debated, and at length, and by both sides. But that should be done on the merits of the issues. And if our values mean anything — for that matter, if our flag means anything — it should be

done with a healthy respect for the other side and a civility that is starting too rapidly to fade from the national discourse.

Having said all that, I also have problems with her protest. It is possible to love your country while disliking the policies of its leaders. (I have this feeling that a lot of the people booing her would have cheered a couple of years ago if she had worn a headband saying “Impeach Clinton.”)

If this is the wrong war at the wrong time, her protest may be the wrong protest at the wrong time. Her complaint is with our leaders, not our country, and I would hope she realizes it.

But for now, all I can think of is 1968, and another sports-related political protest. To show support for the cause of civil rights, black sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised “black power” fists after winning gold and bronze medals at the 1968 Olympics.

It’s a protest that resonates to this day. It also led to their immediate ban from the Olympics. Of course, just four years later in Munich, a true obscenity of political thought followed, and 11 Israelis were dead.

It took us a long time to recover from that era. And I don’t want to have to go through it again.

Can the Spirit of Compromise Ever Return?

May 20, 2005

There were a couple of old slogans that were often used in the Congress in the mid-20th century: "To get along, go along" and "Politics stops at the water's edge."

In short, the art of compromise, of consensus, of accepting less than you want to get some of what you need.

These days, you're as likely to hear a "@\$! you!" from the vice president as any sign of compromise, as we're seeing in the Senate this week with the dispute over judicial nominees. Republicans are having a hissy about Democrats holding up their nominees, ignoring the fact that they did the same thing.

Sadly, that's the way of national politics these days. Gone are the days when Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill could share a drink at the end of the day after bashing each other's brains out in public all afternoon.

Today, with the hatred that has grown, the right thinks the left is abnormal, the left thinks the right is subnormal.

The truth, of course, is that neither side has a monopoly on brains, patriotism, creativity or righteousness.

And both sides, sadly, have their complete, blithering idiots.

For every Jerry Falwell, there is a Ward Churchill. And when you think about it, both said the U.S. deserved to be attacked on 9-11. (Remember Falwell: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way - all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this happen.")

I hope we're starting to see a backlash at the lower levels. At the state level, Gov. Jim Doyle gave up the opportunity for cities to increase the minimum wage on their own for an overall statewide hike. And the Republicans gave up their opposition to the whole thing. Each side got something, and that's the way this is supposed to work.

And locally, compromises are being reached all the time. We're seeing discussions on fitting together three competing developments on the north end of downtown. Nobody is standing aside, refusing to talk. And that's a good thing.

For the county, after the initial shock of not seeing the Mental Health Center renovations go through, we're seeing a renewed interest in moving it forward with the right combination of building and cost. We're still seeing

some obstructions, but the tide is rolling in the right direction.

Maybe some of these people will eventually climb the political ladder and take the spirit of compromise back to where it once belonged.

Today's Political Hatred, Through an Old Book

November 21, 2003

I've been told that a person should read a book three times: once when young, once when middle-aged and once when old — and if you do, you'll read three different books.

The idea, of course, is that we look at the book through different eyes, from the unknowing youth to the old person, filtering the book's message through one's own life.

I've been doing a bit of that recently, after hitting both the University Women's used book sale and the Brown County Library's used book sale.

Some of what I picked up was, well, unusual. I found a paperback, "Baseball Stars of 1963," that might just fetch something on eBay if I ever get around to it.

And somebody was selling an encyclopedia year book from 1961, covering the year 1960. More than you ever needed to know about that wonderful year. Did you know motels are becoming more and more popular?

And then there's the unusually timely, something you don't expect to find on a used book table. It was a copy of William Manchester's "The Death of a President,"

the story of the weekend 40 years ago when John F. Kennedy was killed.

I'm a bit surprised it hasn't been reissued to cash in on the 40-year anniversary. We humans do that; we like numbers that end in zero to remember things. Goodness knows, you found everything you'd ever wanted to know about JFK and his death on TV this week, from sober analysis to lurid autopsy photos to draw the "CSI" crowd.

But it was interesting to reread the book. The first time I read it, I read it as someone who was interested, wanting to learn about this piece of history.

Now, I look at it through other eyes, ones that have had to look at the modern political system.

The extreme right wing in Dallas in the early 1960s was every bit as virulent as it is today, if not more so. It's doubtful today you'd have seen, say Madeline Albright getting hit on the head by a picket sign, as Adlai Stevenson was in 1963.

And while Ann Coulter — the conservatives' pin-up girl — writes books about liberals committing "Treason," a poster in Dallas the day before the assassination showed Kennedy, mug-shot style, with the line "Wanted for Treason."

There were political dirty tricks then as well. Gov. John Connally, who later bolted the Democrats for Richard Nixon, got back at liberal Sen. Ralph Yarborough by

keeping him in the background at key events. (It was splits like this in the Texas Democratic Party that brought Kennedy to Dallas in the first place).

But overwhelming in the period was hatred. Kennedy was vilified by the right wing not only his politics, but his personality, his religion, his family. The publisher of the Dallas Morning News accused JFK of “riding Caroline’s pony” rather than serving as a leader — to Kennedy’s face. Even after his death, people cheered the attacker.

And, sadly, that hasn’t changed. It faded for a bit, in the horrors of the assassinations, of Vietnam, of Watergate. But then it came back, matched spit for spit by Democrats angry over the success of Ronald Reagan.

And that’s where we are today.

So things haven’t changed; that hatred has always been there, and I was reminded of that while reading the book.

Of course, the generally accepted view of the killing — Lee Harvey Oswald, the Book Depository, the whole bit — was light-years away from that hatred. But in a way, that hatred might have fed on it. Oswald was not sharp. He wanted to lash out, Manchester says, to prove himself after a lifetime of failures. Kennedy was the popular political target — why not make him a real one?

And the targets continue today. I just hope we can calm down the national discourse to save ourselves from another weekend like that one 40 years ago.

Report From Another Friday, November 22

November 22, 2002

It remains the Great American Unsolved Mystery, and every time the tumblers click to that combination Friday-November-22, it comes back to mind.

I'm probably at the younger end of the spectrum - at 45! - who has an actual memory from that date. I was sitting in a first-grade classroom when our principal, Mr. Reidl, came on the loudspeaker and announced "I have something I think you should hear."

It was followed by ... an advertisement for Chief Oshkosh Beer, to some giggles. Then came the radio announcer saying that shots had been fired at the president.

We knew there was a president; we had pictures of all of them on the calendar. We knew what shots were; we watched TV. But we couldn't really put the two together, except to get the idea that it wasn't good.

I can only imagine what it was like for the adults. There hadn't been a presidential death since 1945 and FDR.

If you aren't old enough, imagine the shock you felt when you heard of September 11. That - with due respect to the moon landing, Nixon's resignation, the space shuttle explosion - is the defining moment of this part of

the American era, and John F. Kennedy's death was the one of that era.

Several years ago, one of the cable networks found NBC's live coverage of that day and ran the tape. Early in the coverage, Chet Huntley notes that it reminded him of the death of Franklin Roosevelt, and that everyone then remembered where they were when they heard. By the end of the coverage, the newsmen are already saying the same thing.

And the date was inscribed in memory forever.

Friday.

November.

22.

To those of you under, say 45, the two presidential deaths are part of the history books, milestones that are a part of the American whole. If JFK's death is talked about, it is in terms of a conspiracy, an issue, a threat carried out.

The Oliver Stone movie revived interest for a while, but it seems those interested are, again, in that over-45 group. Those who are younger don't care; it happened before they came aboard. Kennedy, to them, is an old liberal senator, or an MTV host doing game shows.

We haven't had a president die on us for a while, and unless Osama bin Laden gets active again, we probably won't; George Bush looks pretty healthy.

And I wonder if there would be the same reaction, especially if a terrorist attack did happen. That would almost be expected.

JFK's murder wasn't. He seemed as young and vibrant as Bush; who knew, then, about his health? After generations of old, white-haired men in power, it was different. After generations of voices on radio, we saw this president every day, waving, playing with his young children, visiting foreign lands, live.

More than any president before, we felt like we knew Kennedy. Today, when politicians are too much with us, we wouldn't miss one or two. But for the first time, Americans - all Americans - got a close-up look at our leader on a daily basis.

And when that was suddenly halted, we had that moment frozen.

And that's why, for those of us who were around then, a November 22 on a Friday is always something that plays with our memory.

Supporting an All-Maverick Ticket in 2004

April 9, 2003

With the announcement last weekend by former Vice President Al Gore that he would not make another run for president - at least, not in 2004 -< the race might really have kicked off.

There seems to be no challenge to President Bush in his own party, and the Democrats haven't shown anybody running who seems to be more than a Michael Dukakis-level challenger.

But there is a ticket that, I believe, could win in 2004. It's one with a familiar ring.

Before I introduce it, a little explanation.

These are unique and difficult times. On Sept. 11, 2001, our country was unified by outside forces as has not happened for many decades.

But that did not last long. Although we still face crisis, war and economic problems, we have gone back to our political ways of old < party sniping, personal attacks and the like. Just witness the Trent Lott fiasco of this month, and the continuing attacks on the Clintons, Gore and Bush from people who can't get past 2000. Or, more locally, the god-awful campaigns of Jim Doyle and Scott McCallum, two minds without an attractive thought.

What we need is true unity < not platitudes of cooperation. We also need a way to select candidates that gives us the best candidates, not the richest or the best-connected.

So I suggest a candidate who would say in advance "I will run in the primaries, but I will focus on the general campaign. And I will name my running mate in advance."

There are two politicians who, I believe, are not so married to the status quo that they would be able to pull this off. And they've worked together before.

My fellow citizens, I give you ...

McCain-Feingold '04.

And let's get to the immediate comment. Yes, McCain is a conservative Republican, Feingold a liberal Democrat. Both men, however, have shown in the past they are willing to listen, to occasionally take stands that do not mesh with a single ideology.

And their work together has been impressive. Without them, campaign finance reform would not have made the small strides it has. I believe they can do it with other issues as well.

Of course, McCain, the senior man, would be the presidential candidate. However, there's no way he could gain the Republican nomination; the Democrats would

have to let him in. And that's where choosing Feingold early as his V.P. would help.

And there is precedent. In 1864, Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, chose a Tennessee Democrat, Andrew Johnson, as his vice-presidential candidate, a shadowing of the work Lincoln would have done to heal the nation after the Civil War.

I think McCain-Feingold could do much to heal our nation's political wounds.

Decree Ignores Constitution, Political Reality

January 16, 2004

It's not often you can time something this exactly, but Bishop Raymond Burke, formerly of La Crosse, has set politics back exactly 44 years.

By now, you've read about how Burke told Catholic lawmakers in his diocese that they could not receive Holy Communion if they supported abortion.

It's the sort of statement that's going to raise debate. Many, including Warren Bluhm on these pages on Tuesday, believe the bishop is within his rights to make rules for those of his faith; that's what bishops do.

Others believe, as I do, that for any religious leader to try to influence the actions of a lawmaker is out of bounds. We are not Iran or Israel; here, people, not clerics, rule.

The bishop's actions have caused a stir in Missouri, where he will become bishop in St. Louis.

"We as legislators have never faced anything like that from an archbishop or bishop in the state of Missouri," Missouri state Sen. Steve Stal told the Associated Press. "I think there are some citizens out there who would also look at it and question whether they want to elect someone who would change their stand because of certain religious

pressure. Telling people they can't receive the sacraments changes the political landscape some."

Rep. Tom Villa, D-St. Louis, said he votes against abortion but doesn't like the idea of a bishop telling him he must. He said he is concerned about the potential for a similar church policy to be adopted for other issues.

"I happen to be right as far as the incoming bishop is concerned on the pro-life stuff. I am clearly wrong on capital punishment," Villa said. "I would have a problem with anybody telling me I can't receive Communion. Your faith is something that's very personal."

Indeed. And to my mind - and I'm not Catholic, not much of anything when it comes to religion really - it borders on extortion, as much as if someone had threatened a legislator's family. "You vote my way, or you won't see your kids again."

Or, in this case, "you won't see your church again."

Granted, it may be that the problem, as Warren suggests, is with the legislators, and that maybe it's time for them to switch. Still, it seems here that is quite a price to pay for voting in a manner that disappoints one man - and that's all a bishop is.

For Burke's action was individual. Bishop David Zubik of Green Bay was closer to the proper way to handle it - talk to legislators you disagree with, try to get them to see the rightness of your cause. But threats? No.

We have representative government in our land. Legislators must continually decide on how to vote, whether by following their beliefs or representing their district. Sometimes, they don't agree with their district.

Sometimes, they vote against their own beliefs for whatever reasons they choose.

That's how government goes. It's human, and riddled with compromises.

Religion isn't. It's strict and inflexible, incapable of allowing another side might be correct. The two are bound to clash.

And that's why the framers of our Constitution sensibly separated the two; Congress (and all lawmakers by extension) can't hamper religion; religion is not required as a test for office. In short, religion can say whatever it wants, but it has no special standing with government.

John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic elected president, knew that. His campaign was targeted by those bigots who said he would make the United States a puppet of the Vatican, and other slanders. And he had to fight it until the day he was killed.

He never did it better than in Houston, in a speech to a group of Protestant ministers:

"I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish, where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source, where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials - and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.

"For, while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been, and may someday be again, a Jew or a Quaker or a Unitarian or a Baptist. It was Virginia's harassment of Baptist preachers, for example, that led to Jefferson's statute of religious freedom. Today, I may be the victim - but tomorrow it may be you - until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped apart at a time of great national peril."

He had it right 44 years ago, and the bishop has it wrong now.

He Did It Because He Could

June 25, 2004

Ah, nostalgia. Remember the old days? Back in the late 1990s, when the Packers went to Super Bowls, Paul Jadin was mayor, we'd never heard of water deals, and you could surf the Internet without fear you'd see somebody getting his head chopped off?

Remember the days of Bill Clinton? Oh, sure you do. President, usually smiling, telling us whether or not he had sex, usually both with the same woman?

Well, those days came back this week in all their glory, thanks to Clinton's new book. You may have heard of it.

It's another chance for Clinton-lovers to cheer their man, for Clinton-haters to tell us he was more vile than Satan, and for the vast majority of us to wonder whatever happened.

Of course, the part everybody wants to read is Clinton's memory of his trip to Greenleaf in 1992 when he played the sax while Bill Clancy sang "Danny Boy" from atop a hay bale.

Well, everybody around here. The rest of the world wants more Monica.

As if we didn't get enough back then. Folks, when you know more about the president's sex life than your

own, it may be time to consider fleeing to Canada, or at least considering the parliamentary system.

The question everybody wanted answered was basic: Why'd ya do it? Possibly throw it all away, break up your marriage, hurt your kid, all for some second-class fooling around?

As it turns out, his answer — not in the book, but in interviews — was basically “because I could.” Well, there you are. It's an answer you'd expect from, say, Mick Jagger or Rod Stewart. And that may explain it all.

For in a way, Clinton was our first “rock star” president, one who grew up with the aura surrounding an entertainment superstar. Sure, Ronald Reagan had been a movie star, but he was an old-time movie star, up in a California mansion. But Jerry Ford? Jimmy Carter? George Herbert Walker Calvin Coolidge Smith Barney Bristol Myers Squibb Time Warner Bush? Not a rocker in the bunch, although some of them may have used a rocker or two.

Not Clinton, not Mr. Sax on Arsenio. He was the President Over America tour, the MTV-er in Chief, and one half expected to hear him start a speech with “Hey Cleveland, ya ready to rock?”

And why not? In a way, only personalities kept it from happening sooner. Rock stars and presidents both travel under heavy protection, never seeing real life, going

from hotel to hotel, custom jet to custom jet, waving at the little people as they go but glad as heck not to really be among them, and would you get me another bottle of water?

In short, you feel no consequences, and eventually, no conscience except for that little twinge you brought with you. And Clinton really didn't bring one at all, if half the stories about him are true.

So instead of a handy groupie, it was a handy intern. Who'd know? And had it not been for some strange circumstances, nobody probably would have known.

And now we get to hear it again. Lucky us.

I just get the feeling it's going to happen again — not necessarily with the guy who's in there now; he's hardly the type — but as long as the president is treated like a rock star, rock star behavior could come out. It's time to remember there are human beings in that job, and they should act like humans and get out of the limo once in a while.

Either that, or we could merge VH-1 with C-SPAN.

A Half-Hour Won't Change A Thing

August 1, 2003

When I caught up to Rep. Mark Green after Tuesday's visit by three Cabinet secretaries to Conger Industries and asked him how it went, he started with "well, you always want more time."

That's understandable. A half-hour on the economy is like trying to explain Einstein's theory during a sound bite. It just won't work.

Let's be honest - it was more a PR move in the classic mold of the elder Bush saying "message - I care." The secretaries come in, shake some hands, seem to listen and then move along to the next stop.

Follow that up on Wednesday, and President Bush doing something he's done less of than invade countries in the past two years - holding a news conference.

Why, the administration is reaching out! It's answering The Big Questions and listening to the Average American!

Hogwash.

Tuesday's show was structured as tightly as any stage production, right down to the setting (Midwest Industrial) and timing (one half-hour, nobody who can ask any embarrassing questions). The press? We had to hustle past security to get all of two questions to the secretary of

commerce, who doesn't exactly draw rock-star-size crowds.

We in the media peanut gallery joked about what would happen if an employee came in with a question about individual taxes, or maybe the USA PATRIOT act. We could just see the boss saying "you know those new jobs that they say are opening up? Yours just joined them."

Let's be honest; this has nothing to do with forming policy. To do that, it would take a Cabinet member actually living in Wisconsin, being in contact with real fork-lift mechanics and Harley workers, and understanding what average people go through. And we'll see that about the same time we see Bill Clinton get an award for chastity.

I'm not blasting the current administration; Democratic presidents are just as guilty. Granted, everybody wants the time of a big shot. But when the attempt is made to give everybody a little bit of time, nothing's going to get said.

I'd like to see the secretary of labor actually spend a week on the line ... the secretary of commerce deal with business problems ... the secretary of housing try to pay rents ... Tommy Thompson deal with a cheapskate insurance company and a mounting hospital bill ... the secretary of transportation ride the bus or commute to work every day instead of ridding in a limousine.

(Maybe the transportation secretary doesn't ride in a limo to work. If that's the case, though, they've got some serious image work to do.) Look, everybody knows the economy went south for two reasons: the dot-com boom faded and 9-11. And we're trying to build back.

But elephant-and-pony shows like this week's two-state bus tour aren't going to do any good. And it also doesn't help when they're hearing from the already-converted.

I would have given - well, a cheesehead - to any of the three secretaries who said to his/her cohorts, "you go up ahead, I'm gonna stay and talk to these angry people outside for an hour or so."

That's another thing you'll never see. But if you're going to represent all the people, and make decisions for all the people, you damn well better be talking to all the people, or a good cross-section.

That's possible, and it can be done. And should be, if things are going to get any better.

In short, it's time for the government to sit down, shut up and listen.

Recall Fever ... Catch It!

August 8, 2003

Gov. Larry Flynt? That possibility came up this week as contenders, pretenders and publicity seekers lined up for a new game show, "Who Wants to be Governor of California?"

The somewhat-tarnished Golden State isn't happy with its current leader, Gray Davis, possibly because his name isn't in black or white. Also because the state's going broke. So enough folks put together a petition to get Gray back on the Gray Line outta town.

And a circus followed. Arnold Schwarzenegger decided to run.* There's a group trying to get Gary Coleman on the ballot. Yes, that Gary Coleman. A porn starlet is campaigning under the slogan "We've tried (Jerry) Brown, we've tried Gray, now let's try blonde."

More than 200 sets of nomination papers have been taken out.

And if it were just California acting like, well, California, it could safely be ignored. Those nuts get the government they deserve.

But around here, it's more serious. We've already seen local boards hit by recall fever. And Hobart is next.

Village President Len Teresinski has been targeted by a segment of the village that feels his policy decisions have harmed the community.

It's not going to be part of this column to review whether Teresinski has done a good job or not, or if his opponents are right in their beliefs or not.

But the continuing spate of recalls calls for some reconsideration.

The spate of recalls in Wisconsin can be traced back to the recall of a state legislator for supporting Miller Park legislation. Since then, the recalls have, invariably, been linked to an issue or two on which the public has been divided.

Since it doesn't take a majority to get a recall petition accepted, recalls have become a way for the minority to influence elections in a way beyond their numbers. As recalls fall outside the traditional election campaigns, they can be manipulated by smaller numbers of voters.

The recall mechanism has its place. There are, I'm sure, legitimate times when an official needs to be removed from office, for malfeasance or other illegalities.

But to have recalls constantly over policy disputes - invariably regarding the spending of tax money - is as much a waste of money as anything the pols can cook up.

There's a reason every issue isn't put to a universal vote. Most of us aren't interested enough to go to meetings to learn about the issues. Newspapers do their best but can't provide every scrap of info. TV is ... well, it's TV.

So we have what is called "representative government." We select people who have the time to look at all the issues, and in their considered opinion, do what is best for all. If they don't, the majority votes them out in the next election.

A recall vote is the political version of hitting the reset button. It can be useful, but if there's a better way to fix it - say, checking the plug to see if it's in the socket - that should be done first.

A good official should keep the concerns of any minority in mind. If not, it's up to that minority to make its voice heard, both at meetings and at the next election.

But to decide public issues not by legislation but by legal revolution is not what government's framers had in mind.

(*) And, of course, eventually won.

Schools Latest Part of Throwaway Society

September 30, 2002

There was a column on the wire the other day about the closing of a supermarket in Texas. It mentioned the items that were in plentiful supply at a clearance sale; you couldn't find any disposable razors, but there were still plenty of blades.

That's how we do things now, throwing them away. And it seems that's what we're about to do with the nation's public schools.

Yes, there are a lot of terrible public schools in this country. Many of them are in the biggest cities, and they're especially bad in crime-riddled, low-income areas.

But instead of trying to find ways to fix them, we're going to let them rot.

Instead, we're going to send the money to parents in the form of vouchers, to let parents pick their favorite private school.

(An aside: let's forget for a moment the idea of public money going to religious schools. I can live with that as long as all schools are treated equally. The fact that there are few public non-sectarian schools is beside the point.)

The voucher plan is the equivalent of trashing one's house and getting government help to move into a

new one - without cleaning out the old one first, or at least, paying for its cleanup. Try that with your landlord and see how well you do.

The goal is an admirable one - a solid education for everyone.

But that will not happen. Vouchers or no, the public schools will still exist - only without a healthy mixture of students. Only those students whose families are too poor to pay for private school even with vouchers will remain with those whose parents have no interest at all in their children.

Welcome to a recipe for disaster.

President Bush has used a slogan repeatedly: "no child left behind." There will be under the vouchers he loves.

Instead of fighting public schools, he should be fighting for them, trying to rebuild them. But that isn't as politically popular. It would require more taxes, of course, as well as more governmental effort and - the part that really won't be popular - more involvement by the public. And not just parents.

Unfortunately, most people without children look on public schools as a necessity at best, a tax drain at worst. They don't see them as the resource they are. In today's fragmented society, what other institutions touch so many lives?

I know that many of the schools in the immediate area are strong and vital, both public and private. That's partly a reflection of the people who live in Brown County.

It isn't like that everywhere. Maybe it's time for an educational Peace Corps, taking that which is good from strong schools and planting it elsewhere.

There are ways to fix the problem of public education. Abandoning young people isn't it.

What Purpose Do Counties Serve?

September 12, 2003

There's a simple way to get rid of the idiots who have made Brown County government a symbol of all that is wrong with elected officials. And it could mean lower taxes. Of course, it could throw many people onto the unemployment lines, or force them to change jobs, but we're all used to that by now, right?

Bear with me on this one, folks.

Why do we have to have counties?

I mean, look at business. You can get savings at "factory outlet" or "factory direct" stores, because there is no distributor or wholesaler in between.

Anybody will tell you that in the workplace, the more layers of management you have, the greater likelihood of confusion.

So why do we tolerate it in government?

There is no real requirement to have counties in Wisconsin. A look at the Wisconsin Constitution shows a lot of clauses relating to counties, including rules on elections and when a county seat may be changed (10-square-mile diaper, please).

But it doesn't require there be counties, not at all.

Granted, counties may have made sense in 1848. All states have them, by one name or another (they're "parishes" in Louisiana). And at a time when America was a rural nation, they were likely necessary.

After all, there were few cities, widely spread. It was difficult for local people to band together for the governmental functions that had to be done. It was especially difficult to handle the key functions of law and order.

So we have sheriffs and circuit courts. But do we need them?

County government handles many areas. It plows the roads and maintains them. It provides health services and inspections. It handles marriage licenses and land records. It can be a force to unite communities in major projects, such as airports or sports facilities.

But can those be done as well by other areas of government?

It may be possible. For that, we turn to Indianapolis. In 1970, the city and Marion County combined into a single government. That does not rule out local governments; there are more than 50 in the county. But it has streamlined the governmental process.

It has also helped the city of Indianapolis grow. Increased population from suburban areas has broadened and strengthened the tax base, allowing more funding in target areas and the potential for improved services.

Reduced overlap of departments and functions has eliminated multiple snags for new and expanding business and smoothed regulatory compliance.

Compare that to the fight over water we are still going through. Instead of all sides pulling together, we saw the city and suburbs so wrapped up in their own best interests that a deal was never going to get done, despite the efforts of several individuals to make it happen.

So what do we do with all the services? Most would go to the cities and villages. Why have both police and sheriff's departments? (The towns could probably contract with nearby police forces for service, much as they do with the sheriff's office now).

Health care? That would probably have to go to the state, as would marriage licenses and the rest of the records. State government would have to provide more offices throughout the city, but have one in each city over 10,000 and one in villages at least 30 miles from any other office. Combine 'em with DMV offices, if you like.

The courts tie in with state courts anyway; eliminating counties might enable better use of judges,

allowing a judge to split between courts and better overall use of staff.

And, finally, we'd have an end to our blithering County Board.

I can see no reason other than tradition to keep counties. A few years ago, when there were suggestions to drop states and go to six regional "federations" for the United States, Mark Russell suggested the only reason we needed states were "college football and Miss America."

And counties don't figure in either of those.

Let's You And Him Fight

May 27, 2005

It was sort of fun Tuesday listening to Rush, Hannity, Savage and the rest of the right-wing crowd bashing on Republicans for a change.

By the time it was over, Michael Reagan had even vowed to vote for Hillary Clinton over John McCain in 2008, if it comes to that.

The reason, of course, was that compromise worked out to allow some of the president's judicial nominees to be voted on, while blocking a move to vote to stop any filibuster.

I was sort of hoping for the filibuster, but that's just me. In the old days, a filibuster used to mean something.

For those of you too young to remember, the Senate allows unlimited debate. However, there has to be someone to talk. One lone senator can hold the Senate up just by talking, stopping all other business. The opposition, which could pass the bill easily, has to wait.

It's not something that's usually used for good reason, and it held up a lot of civil rights legislation that should have been passed decades before. But it led to some great political yarns.

Senators read from cookbooks, calling cards and the Congressional Record just to keep talking. Strom Thurmond holds the all-time record, 24 hours (and it would have been longer if he hadn't insisted on reading only the white pages of the phone book).

Granted, the Republicans have done their share. A filibuster kept Lyndon Johnson from naming Abe Fortas as Chief Justice of the United States. Seems the GOP thought he was too liberal.

So when Democrats threatened to do the same thing against Bush's too-conservative nominees, did the GOP chuckle at having their own card played against them? Of course not.

Instead, led by John McCain, some Republicans saw the light and compromised. As noted here last week, compromise is not a dirty word.

And the true believers - the Rushes and Savages who have never held political office or dealt with its pressures - tore them a new aperture. "We're the majority! We should have won!" they cried.

Nope. Because you were ignoring the minority. They fought back, and some sensible folks heard them. That's why the "soft seven" GOP senators are heroes.

They put the idea of a working government ahead of slavish devotion to an ideology.

Remember a few years ago when Newt Gingrich shut down the government because he didn't like President Clinton's budget? Same deal. The GOP should have won, but didn't. And it damaged Gingrich so badly that he was out as speaker a few months later.

There are times to wield power, and times to let it stand down and do what looks good, rather than what feels good.

McCain and the Soft Seven found that time. And he may just have become a favorite for the 2008 presidential race among those who, unlike the radio bloviators, believe in government, not politics.

*A Non-presidential Presidential Appearance
Disappoints*

July 16, 2004

I was tempted to see if the vendors outside the Resch Center on Wednesday - the ones who have been at every political event this year selling buttons for the appropriate candidate - had a T-shirt that read "I went to see the president and all I got was this lousy politician."

After all, you go to see the president, you expect a little pomp and ceremony. After all, he is President of the Free World, as Rep. Phil Montgomery titled him during one of the introductory speeches. (Is the vote in from Greenland yet?)

Except for the little presidential seal on the podium (well, that and the heavy security), Pat Buchanan or Dennis Kucinich could have shown up with no change in the program.

Bush's entry into the building was spectacular from a showbiz point of view - his campaign bus drove right into the Resch Center- and his open blue shirt may have given him a man-of-the-people aura, but I was sorta hoping for the blue suit and "Hail to the Chief," neither of which made an appearance.

After all, a president is a president, and while the bus was cool, you missed the big limo. Ah, well, there's no

doubt he'll be here again, and maybe he'll look a bit more like a president next time.

Of course, when you're running for office, it's good to have that just-off-the-bus look, seeming to be Everyman with knowledge of Everyproblem.

Forget that he's ripping John Kerry for Kerry's upper-crust lifestyle when Bush has the same background.

Forget that he's ripping Washington and Congress when (a) his family has spent its life in public service and (b) Congress is mostly made up of his party.

Just believe what he's telling you now. And the same thing is true for Kerry.

There are times when I think it might be better to take personalities out of politics. Have candidates submit a list of what they propose to do and how they propose to get the money to do it. No names or background. Find the one you like and vote for that person, and if it happens to be nobody you've ever heard of, that's tough. Maybe we'd find somebody who can actually do the job.

It's also worth noting that two groups of people seemed to be nonexistent in the stands at Bush's rally: people who are not white and people who are not Christian.

The former, of course, is an aspect of life around here, but it's interesting anyway. I was looking as people

wandered in and saw nobody who was black, tan and darn few bordering on beige. I know there are black, Hispanic and Native American conservatives out there, and yet I only saw one I knew.

But that doesn't worry me as much as the heavy use early in the program of evangelical Christian music and prayer. I do not believe that religion has no place in the public debate. I have written that I worry when it's used as a club to keep politicians in line. But every person must find his or her own belief.

So for any political rally to feature one type of religion exclusively is not only wrong on its face, it's something that makes me wonder how politically smart the organizers are. I always believed politics was to be all-inclusive.

It was meant to bring all of us together, to debate the issues fairly, to make sure all viewpoints were heard, and to respect each other.

Well, that died a long time ago, and now we have rallies aimed at one type of religion. Were I Jewish, or Buddhist - or even a more mainstream Protestant denomination that believes religion is a more personal thing -

I would have felt out of place, perhaps not wanted, possibly as intimidated as Spike Lee at a NASCAR race.

I especially think this is wrong at a rally featuring the person who is president of the entire United States, where the right to hold your own religion or not at all is guaranteed in the Constitution.

Oops - I forgot. Except for that little seal, Bush wasn't being a president at all.

Chapter 7:

SOME OTHER SPORTS

While my column was basically news-oriented, sports snuck into it a few times - and not just Packers football.

After all, if I'm going to go after politicians for ridiculous behavior, I can do that to sports figures - and fans - as well.

By Contrast, We're Sensible About Football

December 10, 2004

Green Bay, the T-shirt says, is a "drinking town with a football problem." And we've all seen that in various ways.

But there are times when I think Green Bay, when it comes to football, is a sensible, sober-sided community compared to others, especially in the southern United States.

If you follow college football you know that the Bowl Championship Series (which only bestows a mythical championship and isn't really a series) found itself with a multitude of unbeaten teams this year. Since the whole setup is designed to find only two teams and match them up, this was a problem.

The real problem is that three of them - Southern California, Oklahoma and Auburn - are in the so-called "power conferences," the ones that have all the football-factory schools. And because Southern Cal and Oklahoma were higher in the polls at the beginning of the season and didn't lose, they kept their top-two rankings.

Auburn was a surprise, gradually moving up. But with the top two entrenched there, it ended up third in the polls, and got shut out of the title game, even though it played in the tough Southeastern Conference.

It's not surprising that Auburn fans are unhappy. And they've found a target.

Sportswriter Paul Gattis covers Alabama football for The Huntsville (Ala.) Times. He's one of the voters in the Associated Press football poll. And he voted Auburn third.

He has been getting calls from Auburn fans. So have other writers. But Gattis, in the home state, was a major target. E-mailers - more than 300 - said he should vote for the home-state team; that he voted Auburn lower because he covered rival Alabama, and other malfeasance.

Finally, Gattis had enough and wrote what I believe was a tough but fair column for the Monday paper. He didn't call his readers stupid, but did say he was insulted by the attacks on his personal integrity. And he explained his votes and said he stood by them.

That was apparently too much for his editor. Melinda Gorham. She wrote another column Thursday apologizing for the Gattis column. She called it "mean-spirited and callow, brushing off the opinions of hundreds of Times readers with its 'I really don't care what you think' attitude."

She said he should be more tolerant of counter-opinions. He did complain about the lengthy letters he got trying to compare the teams, but when one considers the

lunatic fringe letters he got, his frustration is understandable.

It's a tempest elsewhere, but it could have been avoided. For one thing, I'm happy to have a boss who stands behind his columnists, loony as we may be.

For another, it just shows the conflict that a newspaper can face when its writers participate in such things as polls. I did so once, when I was a sports editor in Indiana, and found it foolish; I couldn't see all the teams and was going on others' reports. Hearsay evidence doesn't fly in court, and it shouldn't with reporters worthy of the name.

It's time for writers to quit deciding who plays. Cover the games; don't book them. It's time to drop the writers' poll and force the NCAA to find a better system to pick its champion - one based on merit, not politics.

And then maybe we can go back to writing good columns.

"Go Cubs!" We Cry - But Why?

October 10, 2003

They're being watched all over Northeast Wisconsin as people hope and, yes, pray they'll bring a championship home. They've overcome rough spots and lack of past success and now, it seems, there's hope where there was none before.

Oh, and their fans also hope the Green Bay Packers do well.

We're talking about the Chicago Cubs, who have a surprisingly strong hold on the baseball emotions of Brown County.

Why? Shouldn't this be Milwaukee Brewers territory?

Well, yes and no. Back in that one stunning year of 1982, and for a bit before and after, the Brewers were hot. And they were hot here as well. But it was temporary. And that was when the Brewers were in the American League, which never really caught on in Wisconsin.

There's interest in the Brewers here, of course, but it depends on how they do. And lately, the interest has faded, much as the Brewers seem to do in April. (Granted, there was this summer's winning streak, but that was temporary.)

So the Brewers are a diversion, as much for Bob Uecker's entertaining play-by-play as for anything they do on the diamond.

But the Cubs - ah, that's different.

They have always had a hold around here, and for that, we go back to the olden days when the Cubs actually won a pennant now and then. (Hardly a man is now alive who remembers 1908 and a World Series win.)

The Cubs were the closest major league team, of course; the White Sox were much farther away and you had to go through Chicago to get to them. Wrigley Field was, then as now, a fan's dream park. And up to World War II, they were pretty good.

One local political leader said he got his case of Cub Fever in 1945. "I saw a headline - my dad used to get the Chicago Tribune - that said 'Cubs Win Pennant,' and since I was a Cub Scout, I liked them right away," he said.

In those days, with no TV and no local teams, the closest baseball on the radio was the Cubs on powerful WGN. (A tradition that continues on cable TV, of course, although the Cubs aren't on as much any more.)

Which explains some of the older fans. But it also explains the fans now. Like religion, politics and taste in cars, baseball teams are handed down through generations. If your granddaddy liked the Cubs, the odds

are pretty good you're at least going to listen for their scores.

And that's what has happened here. The only break in that came in 1953, when the Braves moved to Milwaukee and took baseball by storm, reaching two World Series and just missing two others.

But the bitterness that followed the team's absconding to Atlanta in 1965 killed any hope of that. When the Brewers arrived in 1970, many fans weren't willing to forget or forgive - at least until the Brewers started winning.

But the Cubs? Well, during that break between Braves and Brewers, they actually threatened to be good. Ernie Banks and Ron Santo were heroes of the day, and the 1969 Cubs have become one of the most famous second-place teams in history, leading late into the season until they were swept away in the miracle that became the New York Mets.

For all these reasons, they've kept their grip on the hearts of local fans. But there may be something else. In general, folks up here hate folks from Illinois, using derogatory initials we can't reprint here. Bears? Bah. Bulls? Bullfeed.

But the Cubs? There, and only there, we find common ground. Lest we get any visions of a Nobel Peace

Prize, however, forget it. That's about the only thing we have in common.

Beauty is in the Shirt of the Beholder

July 21, 2002

When Robin Yount arrived at Miller Park on Tuesday for his role as an honorary captain in the All-Star Game, he turned down a chance to don a replica of his 1982-era road uniform.

You may remember it - powder blue with wide, dark-blue-and-gold stripes on the sleeve and collar, a double-knit pullover.

The jersey (and Yount's refusal to wear what he called a "clown outfit") made a lot of national stories after the game. Inevitably, the uniform was described as "ugly."

When my wise wife heard this, she shouted "I don't blame him!" She calls my replica jersey the second-ugliest shirt I own, right after a 1970s orange-striped Houston Astros jersey.

But that blue uniform ugly? No way!

Not if you were in Milwaukee in 1982. Not if you remember Yount's heroics to win the division on the final day at Baltimore. Not if you saw a World Series in Milwaukee.

And not on the tape I saw the other night on ESPN Classic of Game 5 of the American League Championship Series, a game I was at, a game that put the Brewers in that World Series.

Granted, they were in pinstripes that day, not blue. But the memories still came back, names I haven't thought of in many years. Ben Oglivie making two errors, then coming back with a home run. Pete Ladd, looking like Carrot Top on, er, steroids (sorry), nailing down the final outs. Marshall Edwards and Don Money.

And oh, that night! My brother-in-law and I took a shuttle bus from County Stadium and rode at a crawl down Bluemound Road, slapping high-fives out the window with anybody and everybody.

And then came Tuesday. Now, halting the All-Star Game wasn't, in and of itself, a bad idea; no sense getting anybody hurt (and it allowed us to get the final score in the paper).

But as with so much in baseball, the decision process stunk. Instead of going into the game saying, "We'll get everybody to play, but if it's tied after 10, we go home," there was no thought given at all.

Which is what happens to so much in baseball. Each side of the player-owner dispute thinks only of itself. Both sides would like steroid testing, but if one side suggests it, the other will automatically object.

I've written about baseball in this space before and offered my suggestion; break up the present system and start all over, with a new ownership organization and new rules - revenue sharing, fair free agency and player

movement, and other things that would correct baseball's current woes.

Instead, we have fans in the stands chanting "Let them play!"

They could be saying that this fall, or next year. All the fans want is to watch them play. And it seems like all the owners and players want to do is find ways to avoid it.

Taking Sports Just a Bit Too Seriously

January 17, 2003

Sometimes I'm asked if I miss my old sportswriting days. The answer varies depending on the mood I'm in, but the general answer is "no."

What? You don't miss seeing all those games, all those great athletes, all that excitement?

Well, I do — sometimes, when things do get exciting. Game day was generally fun, especially when covering a winning team or a tournament final. Those are the days you feel you ought to pay for the privilege of having such a job (just kidding, Mr. Wood, sir!)

Most days, you aren't covering a nice, exciting game, but practice. And unless someone gets hurt or there's a fight, if you've seen one practice, you've pretty much seen them all.

Then — what fun — you get to go talk to people who have, from birth, been trained to say nothing interesting.

Granted, there are exceptions, but they are balanced out by the ones who say nothing at all.

All of this, of course, is on deadline, tight deadline; except when the County Board gets in ranting mode (that is, every meeting), the deadline pressure is fairly rare in news.

But what may have turned me off once and for all is the attitude of everybody involved.

I can understand professional athletes; it is their job, after all, and a high-pressure one, where you perform or leave. They do take it seriously.

But the fans? If I had a penny for every time I've had to deal with fans who have lost all sense of perspective, I'd be able, at the very least, to buy the computer I'm writing this column on.

I've had plenty of calls from parents who are sure we are ignoring their high school, sport or son/daughter.

I've had plenty who totally misread a funny line and insisted a joke was seriously insulting. And I remember fans who — well, you wonder if they are able to dress themselves.

Take the time in the midst of the Tony Mandarich hype when Mandarich was threatening to hold out and go fight Mike Tyson. I did a column joking that the Packers had dropped Mandarich and signed Tyson, complete with references to events in the season to come.

Need I tell you that we got calls from people asking when the Packers had signed Tyson?

But my main complaints are fans who just can't believe there's anything more important. We got a letter the other day from a man in Arizona who's a fan of the

Minnesota Vikings. Actually, it was a copy of a letter he sent to a National Football League bigwig. (I'll leave the fan's name out of this; as you'll see, he's suffered already.)

He had already called the NFL guy complaining about the officiating mistakes in the game between the Vikings and Packers at Lambeau Field (remember, the one with the brawl at the end?) This was his followup, in which he suggested that "gambling or exchange of money was somehow involved in this dastardly officiating."

He then complains about the \$10,000 fines to two Vikings players involved in the brawl adding, "Had I been personally involved in this game, and been treated as our Viking team was treated, if I had had an opportunity and a Green Bay player or fan had walked by, I believe that God would have justified whatever I may have done to them."

(Right now, I'm picturing lightning, thunder and a gigantic hand coming down from the sky with the voice of John Facenda saying, "It's OK if you go after No. 42.")

Finally, the letter writer threatens to "send several copies of this letter to people more influential than myself." Which obviously explains how I ended up with it. I haven't heard anything from Kofi Annan or Hans Blix yet.

It's fun to act silly sometimes and to get vibrant and steamed up about one of our little amusements such as a football game.

But when it's over, let's sober up, and return to
real life, OK?

Chapter 8:

SOMEWHAT PERSONAL

I tried to make the columns a bit different every week. And there isn't a presidential election every year, thank goodness.

So sometimes, in looking for material, I look homeward, and sometimes inside myself. (Yuck.)

This batch will give you more of the author's life than you may wish to know.

Don't Like What's On? You Can Blame Me

November 28, 2003

I have a confession to make. My wife and I are a Nielsen family.

At least, we were this week. Our jottings in a little diary will help decide the future of television.

Heaven help us all. Or y'all, as my wise Georgia wife would say. To twist a line from Fox News, "I decide, you watch."

It was a heavy responsibility, one that would have weighed upon us had we not fallen asleep in our chairs.

It started a few weeks ago with a call from the Nielsen folks. A nice lady asked if we'd keep a diary of our TV viewing. As much out of curiosity as a need for the \$5 they send (in singles), I agreed.

The diaries arrived a week later. They list every hour of a week, broken down into 15-minute increments. Watch a show for at least five minutes, it gets entered. Mark when the TV's on, off, or on with nobody watching. (I have a feeling that happens a lot.)

And there's a separate line for each viewer; male head of household, female head of household (does that get a lot of use when "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" is on?), and extra blanks for kids, visitors and, I guess, people who look through your window.

What's weird is that they have chosen two abnormal viewers. I'm not one to sit down and watch a movie or a long drama. Instead of feasting, I graze; a nibble here, a nibble there. Most women would identify me as a typical male, afraid to give up his control of the clicker, lest disaster happen.

And with digital cable, there's a lot of grazing territory. I roam the vast telegenic plains, finding morsels here and there, turning away from the poison of Lifetime Real Women or the rotting carcass of QVC's Diamonique Hour, occasionally stopping from hunger to devour a "Simpsons" rerun.

My wife, on the other hand, has a thing for real crime - the type of things that fill Court TV or the late hours of MSNBC. She decompresses with cute cuddlies on Animal Planet.

It's a good thing we have separate lines in the diary, or the folks from the Mental Health Center might be looking for me. (As if these columns weren't enough of a tipoff.)

We come close enough on some things to stay peaceful (bull riding has animals for her, the possibility of random violence for me) and she grants me Packers games as I grant her long stretches of country music videos.

All this ended Wednesday, as we entered the last item in the diary, sealed it and sent it to a far-off land with

people who have to read my scratching. If they don't ... well, heaven only knows what you'll be seeing next year.

I've always been a little worried about the rating system. As somebody once said, "if one Nielsen family shuts off the set and goes to visit its grandmother, does that mean a million other families are shutting off the sets and visiting their grandmothers?"

And yes, there was temptation. Part of me wanted to spend the week exploring PBS, staring blank-eyed at Bravo, or otherwise acting cultural. But if I had, it wouldn't have been right - and frankly, I couldn't have taken much more of those pledge drives.

So it was strictly middlebrow - no opera, but no Smackdown! either. And, thank goodness, no infomercials.

Humpty Dumpty Has a Great Fall

December 12, 2003

I'm a little surprised I didn't make the news Tuesday night. But I may still have a shot at "America's Funniest Home Videos."

Things like this seem to happen to me. A few years ago, I was covering a Mike Holmgren statement after practice and I had to sneeze. It reached the point where my only hope was to sneeze between questions. I didn't.

Other reporter: "Will losing so-and-so affect your running game?" Mike: "Well, I..."

Me: "Ah-CHOOOO! Ah-CHOOOO!" (news conference dissolves in laughter)

Mike: "It won't affect me, but you can see how it affected Ray..."

I am told I made the Sunday night blooper reel on a Milwaukee television station that week.

Happily, no bloopers are out there of my latest fiasco. If so, I'd like to buy the tapes. I was running late to a news conference Tuesday morning in Ashwaubenon; the office had called at 8:25 a.m. for the 8:30 a.m. event.

No shower, just pull on clothes and go. So I get to the village hall, the folks at the front desk wave me toward the room, the cop at the door waves me in and...

I trip on the rug and fall - hard.

"(DELETED!)" I yell, rather interrupting the press conference, and I'm rewarded with a loud "shhhh" from somebody up front.

I don't know who because I'm still making sure all body parts are attached. I have a sore arm - is it broken?

Well, it's sore. But it doesn't feel broken, so I haul myself up with help and stand there for the rest of the news conference. As I did, my right thigh gets tighter and tighter and tighter to the point where I can't put any weight on it without extreme pain.

So I wave to the officer at the door who had first asked if I needed the paramedics and agree, since they might be useful. The Ashwaubenon Village Hall isn't a bad place to be if you're going to try to kill yourself accidentally.

They bring in the cart and roll me into the ambulance - me clutching my press conference notes. My blood pressure is almost off the charts, and my thigh is really killing me, and so is my right forearm. Into the emergency room at St. Mary's, where they give me the once over, and then to X-ray, which is woefully uncomfortable.

I can't find a way to hold my leg that doesn't hurt, and twisting it around for the X-ray is really painful. I'd kill for good drugs.

But the good news - nothing was broken.* Just either a torn muscle or a bad, bad bruise. So a little morphine and some crutches later, I'm out of there in two hours.

My wife was there by that time. Turns out one of the TV stations called my office to let them know I'd broken my leg. (Typical TV news accuracy, although the gesture is appreciated.) So they call my wife at work to see what hospital I'm at. (Yup, she didn't know, and she freaked). So she calls all four hospitals, getting me with the last one. I reassured her and told her to get back to work and I'd call when I knew more. I also called the office to let them know I wasn't dead.

I'm doing OK now, wrapped toe to hip in ace wrap and stiff and sore. And on crutches for a few days. It'll be about three weeks before I'm OK. So if I'm covering your event, get those cameras rolling. Tom Bergeron probably won't be far behind.

(*) Well, nothing in my leg was broke. I did get a hairline fracture in my elbow, but it's healed nicely, thank you.

Go for the Starring Role

April 16, 2004

A few weeks ago, I mentioned in passing that I don't go to many movies. I'm interested in them; I read reviews to keep up with popular culture, but I don't like to go to a theater and watch them, and I can barely tolerate them at home, where the chairs are more comfy, the food is cheaper and there's something else to watch.

I have been known to walk out of my living room if I don't like what's on the screen, leaving my wise wife to sit there and finish out whatever's playing.

It happened just a couple of weeks ago when she was watching an old Whoopi Goldberg flick, "Jumping Jack Flash." I hung in there through the plot coincidences and near-misses that only a movie script provides, but when the final scene erupted in gunfire, I walked into the bedroom and stayed there staring at a book until it ended.

And this was a comedy, for heaven's sake, and you knew nobody was really going to get hurt. But it's one big, BIG reason why I won't pay to see a movie, and why my wife pretty much has to find time alone to watch one.

Maybe it's because in this line of work, I keep seeing the results of real violence. I've covered trials with blood-stained mattresses and seen police photos of murder scenes. And I'd rather not waste the few years I have left on this planet watching many more, even fake ones.

I think it really began with the movie "JFK." I have seen the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination once, and that was plenty. To this day, I can not look at that film. But I'm still interested in the murder.

So I really wanted to see the movie. But when I heard that much of it plays around that Zapruder film, I got angry at Oliver Stone for profiting off a real murder. Much as I'm not happy with Mel Gibson for making a billion or so off the murder of Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, the movies keep getting bloodier and bloodier. Here's an Associated Press comment on Hollywood's new hit, "Kill Bill:" "Sliced-off arms and decapitated necks blasted blood like fire hoses as (Uma) Thurman wielded a mystical sword against a legion of foes."

Yeah, that's entertainment.

Look, real life is sick enough, and only the knowledge that tastes differ make me wonder about the sanity of people who go to movies like this.

I'd like to take them to a real murder scene, a real car crash, and see how long these violence-lovers last before losing their lunch.

I'm no prude; I love raunchy humor, and I think anyone who complained about Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" seriously needs to get a life.

But pay \$10 to watch fake blood and gore?

For just a little more, you can go to Iraq and see the real thing - and maybe even, if you get captured, play a starring role.

It's the Little Things that Tick Me Off

May 7, 2004

Don't say you've never thought of this, whether it's three wishes, unlimited power, a genie, being God for a day, or whatever.

What would you do if you had the power?

With me, it's usually "what would you end." And I'm not talking about the big things - cancer, war, taxes and Geico commercials. If God can't stop those, how can somebody with God-like powers stop 'em?

I'm talking about the annoyances, the pains in the neck, things where you say "there oughta be a law," things that just plain bug you. Such as ... well, bugs.

So here they are, a list of somewhat petty annoyances that, when I get my powers, will be the first things sent packing.

Computerese - Now, computers are a wonderful thing. But if you haven't figured out the geek language, they can be dangerous. All of us have to use them at some time, and most of us can do basic things, but the minute something goes out of whack, it's off to tech support, where we are told something like "the DIMMs have fleebled from the USB ports into the RAM Matrix, and your FLEEM has too much SPOO." (Five bonus points if

you find the terms I just borrowed from "Dilbert".) English, please!

Sideline reporters - They could provide some useful information if they were actually reporting, but most of the time they are: a) giving us injury information that the PR people handed out that could be read just as easily in the booth and b) conducting inane interviews with coaches who would rather be anywhere else. "Coach, what do you have to do in the second half to stop their defense from sitting on your quarterback on every third play? "Uh, we have to make some adjustments." Wow. What's amazing is that anybody could be fired for doing a bad job on this, but they have been.

Petty items that refuse to leave government boards - A board debating, at length, the reasons whether or not to spend money on a new mental health center or how to save money to make sure police presence is not cut is a wonderful thing. A council debating, at ridiculous length, the need for hot dog carts on a street, the site of a new village hall, or whether or not to build extended corners at intersections is a body that looks like it wants to debate the trivial at the expense of the important. And a board debating civility resolutions instead of just behaving like professionals and not spoiled brats is just a running joke.

Partisan elections - One wonders what would happen to government if, suddenly, candidates had to run

on merit and ideas, rather than just slapping on a political label. Who knows - we might see some Democrats who are willing to admit that many social programs don't work, and some Republicans who are willing to understand that some are necessary. And nobody will have to waste time defending or attacking a nonpartisan president, who will have to get bills passed on the force of ideas, not party pressure.

Infomercials - I wouldn't ban them, but I would say that any station that runs, say, three half-hour infomercials should have to run a half-hour public service show, preferably free time for political candidates in which the candidates would be required to tell us in detail how they are going to fix the problems they accuse the other candidate of causing.

Bad columns - Columnists who waste valuable newspaper space just griping about things that bug them should be taken out and horsewhipped, but who has a horse nowadays?

A Graduation Speech I'd Like to Give

May 21, 2004

"Members of the faculty, faculty members, students of Huxley and Huxley students ... I guess that covers everyone."

- Groucho Marx, "Horse Feathers"

Dear members of the class of 2004:

You find yourself today on the cusp of a new life - if you've found yourself at all during the time you've spent here. In a few minutes, you will march up here, hear your name read, and be given an empty cover which will hold a diploma after all your fees are paid, including the cap and gown you've rented for today. It is one final lesson for you: appearances are everything.

You have learned many lessons in your time here, and most of them will be out of your memory by the time you leave this building. I took astronomy and still can't find anything other than the Big Dipper. I took three different math classes before I could find one I could pass to get the three credits I needed for my degree. I took gym class and ... well, look at me.

Look at the people on either side of you. One out of three of you will make up one-third of this graduating class. Yes, that's a meaningless statistic, but so is any other you will face as a graduate.

You will be told about the job market, your chances of a moneymaking career, your chances of dying young or old. And they're all meaningless, just measurements of what has gone before.

It is a tradition for graduation speakers to tell you of your grand and glorious future, that you will change the world. Well, if one of you does, that will be amazing in itself.

But there are smaller worlds, and you can change those. We have a terrible record in our land of keeping families together. You can change that. We have a record number of personal bankruptcies. You can change that. We have record-low voter turnouts and public offices where nobody runs because they don't want to get involved. You can change that.

You won't change the world, but you can nudge it in the right direction.

I joked earlier about whether you found yourselves while you studied here. Maybe you did. You are not the same person who entered classes here, because of your life experiences. And that, to me, is where your real learning took place. You may have written a paper on Hemingway, but did you write about your own experiences?

You may have studied nursing, but didn't your real healing come when you held the hand of a friend who was going through tough times?

Ask me what I remember from school, and it boils down to the people I met, and the places I went, and the experiences I had, for good and ill.

You have made your way through school, and that is not an achievement to be ignored. It is a mental, and often physical, challenge. You are being congratulated today, and you should be.

But you take with you not only the hours in the classroom, but the hours in the car, and the bus, and on the sofa. And that is where you spent most of your time.

You take people with you, the ones you met, the ones who taught you about yourself and your place in a new universe, one you hadn't imagined when you set foot here for the first time. You'll get a diploma - or at least the holder - today.

Tomorrow, you'll get a life.

Leave That Flag Right Where It Is

December 21, 2004

First off, a disclaimer - my father was in World War II, as a Navy radarman in the Aleutian Islands. And my mother was a county president of the American Legion Auxiliary. We flew a flag from our front porch on holidays.

So I think my background does give me a reason to comment on this one.

The reaction against the Green Bay Packers lowering the U.S. flags to half-staff in honor of Reggie White is nothing short of ridiculous.

Had this been a first - had it been a unique situation - I might have agreed with them. Lowering the flag is a major step, a public one. That's what makes it so affecting when we see it happen. Something major has happened.

In his book on the death of John F. Kennedy, William Manchester devotes several pages to just what flags were lowered when, and the reaction of those who saw them lowered.

That is why on Sunday, when the Packers lowered the flags atop Lambeau Field, I made sure our photographer, Tina Gohr, got a picture of it. She got a

beautiful one, right at sunset, and it was on the national Associated Press wire.

Which may have been the problem.

The Packers, of course, have lowered the flags before, for Mark Hatley, their front-office player assistant; for Tony Canadeo, who gave many years to the organization as player and board member; and for Irvin Favre, Brett's dad.

In no case was disrespect to others meant, and that's the case this week. The Packers, as a family, are mourning someone who meant a great deal to them, and this is a public way to show that.

They weren't the only ones. Flags were lowered at San Francisco's stadium, a city where White never played for the local team - during Sunday's game.

It's done elsewhere. Post offices lower the flag for a late postmaster. City buildings lower the flag when a city worker dies. Schools have done so when a student dies.

It's a unifying symbol - until now.

White's death received national publicity, and many people who wouldn't have noticed the flags being lowered noticed this time.

And there was anger from area veterans.

Why? I'm not sure. When Irv Favre died, the war in Iraq was going on, so it's doubtful that it was some sort of wartime concern.

And there were no comments for anyone else the Packers honored, most of whom (with the possible exception of Canadeo) didn't do as much to turn this franchise around as Reggie White. So why now?

I have to wonder if it's not the gesture, but the man.

Reggie White, for all the eulogizing that has been done (including, I admit, my own), was an imperfect person. He gave a lot to the community, but he also said some things that, while they may have been well-meaning and heartfelt, were pretty wrong.

Oh, and he's black and outspoken. So maybe that's it. I don't know, and I hope that isn't the case.

Let's just say I'm confused.

The Packers decided to give in Wednesday, and will now put only their team flag at half-staff. That won't look good with the two big flags atop the stadium still at the top of the pole, but that's their decision.

Oh, and for those of you wedded to the flag code, I can think of another example when it was broken - this time to honor some special veterans.

According to Richard Reeves' book about Richard Nixon's presidency, Nixon called Lady Bird Johnson - whose husband, President Lyndon Johnson, had died just before the Vietnam War ended - to ask if she would be offended if he requested flags be returned to the top of their poles a few days early to celebrate the return of prisoners of war.

Not surprisingly, she didn't mind a bit.

Taking Sports Just a Bit Too Seriously

January 17, 2003

I now know how the Star-Spangled Banner felt at Fort McHenry. Still flying, but with a few extra holes and some flame damage.

That's the result of last week's column in which I defended the Green Bay Packers for lowering the flag atop Lambeau Field to half-staff to honor Reggie White.

As you may remember, that drew complaints from some veterans and others who said the action violated the U.S. Flag Code. The code says only the president or a state governor can order the flag lowered. (In retrospect, I'm a bit surprised Jim Doyle didn't suggest that, that little vote monger.)

I suggested the flag flap was minor, and was promptly sent e-mail bombs bursting in air, and a lot of red glares in the regular mail as well.

I even heard from the guy who started the fuss, or at least, the guy who wrote about him. Dan Wilson wrote the first story on the issue for the Appleton Post-Crescent after an employee down there, an ex-Marine, noticed the flags. He asked about it back at the office, and Wilson followed up.

Which, if nothing else, explains why no story (or complaints) came after the Packers did the same thing for

several other people. “The reason is we were unaware of those instances and if we had known about it, we would have done the story at that time,” Wilson wrote.

Yup, I can hear you out there — “well, obviously, YOU guys knew about it; you ran a photo about it. So why didn’t you do a story?”

Call it ignorance of the law, I guess. The custom of lowering the flag by a group for honoring one of its own has become more and more widespread, as I mentioned last week. I did know there were specific times (30 days, for example, for a president or ex-president).

I quickly learned. More than one person sent me the relevant information, usually with a “you should KNOW this!”

Well, maybe. I’m not in the business of flying flags, and just as I don’t know how to operate a steam locomotive or fix a refrigerator, I don’t know everything about flying flags.

Maybe it’s the fault of our schools — goodness knows they get blamed for every other ill in society.

So we’ve all learned.

There were also complaints about the Packers continuing to fly the flags at half-staff after the situation became a controversy.

“It’s bad form, it’s very bad form,” wrote an ex-Navy officer.

But then there was the woman who said that her father, a Korean War veteran, “would have been one of the first vets out there to help your flag bearer lower it in Reggie’s honor.”

Another wrote “whose flag is it, anyway? It isn’t the president’s flag (he has his own), or the American Legion’s flag or VFW’s flag. It belongs to all of us ... I am glad that you thought to include so many contributors to the public good who have been rightly honored by a public expression of grief.”

In retrospect, I haven’t made a final decision. I understand the Flag Code, but I also understand the need for a group or community to publicly show its sadness, such as the folks at Bay Port High School who lowered the flag when one of the school’s students died last week.

I hate to think of roving bands of “flag police” roaming around, jotting down locations of illegal half-staff flags and harassing the bereaved.

Maybe it’s time to change the code to allow, say, a 48-hour period for personal use. Or, perhaps, just leave a flagpole empty, or run a plain black flag in place of the U.S. flag.

If anyone has any other ideas, send them along.

It's the Constants of Life

January 21, 2005

I don't believe in many things - yes, sweetheart, I'm a cynical reporter, now shaddup and get me rewrite - but I do believe there is some force of balance to the universe. That there are enough good events to balance out the bad. That when parents name their baby Tod with one d, another pair of parents will name their baby Tedd with two d's.

It's not easy to believe. There are things large and small that shake that theory. I know of nothing yet that could possibly balance that tsunami.

And even in the small corner that is my own life, there are some things that seem out of whack - including coming around the corner of Walnut and Monroe and seeing a News-Chronicle van in front of the Press-Gazette garage.

But the universe tries to right itself, even in small ways.

When I have spent the day thinking I am something special because I have hobnobbed with the high and mighty as I sniff for stories, I return home and am greeted by a loving and wise wife, with directions to the litter box that must be cleaned.

My visits to the doctor with good news about weight loss must be done while driving past a ton of fast-food outlets.

Still, there are constants. No matter what we print about politics, someone will not like it. No matter how well the Packers play, there will be complaints about something done wrong. There will always be lights on my voice mail as I arrive, and there will always be Nigerian bank scam spam.

(Although somebody came up with a new twist the other day - a bank scam letter purporting to be from the widow of Yasser Arafat. Seems she has all of his money, and...)

Change, we are told, is the only constant. Perhaps. And maybe that is why we grab all the "constants" we can. We seek the familiar, and mourn its loss.

For example, take the proposal to build condominiums near Lambeau Field, to cater to the luxury-box types who seek shelter and good parking on game weekends. When I covered a meeting on that project the other day, there were plenty of good arguments for (tax base) and against (street closings) the project.

But there was also an undertone from many people that this was another change in their lives, and they had just about had enough. Some mentioned living in the

same area for decades, and seeing hay crops brought in where Kmart now stands.

Others remembered the days when game Sundays were just that - Sundays, when people would come in the morning, tailgate for lunch, watch a 1 p.m. game and then go home, instead of starting in the morning of a 3:15 p.m. game, and driving off in the darkness, or having to be home all day on a Monday to deal with early parkers for an 8 p.m. game.

So things change. Someday not even Brett Favre will be a constant, and eventually, none of us will be.

You get depressing thoughts like that on a gray, snowy, cold January day. And that is definitely a constant.

Do Not Call - Especially if You're an Idiot

February 4, 2005

There has been a lot of news lately about the state "do-not-call" list, that popular device that keeps most telemarketers from ringing you up to chat about their great deals on carpet, siding or whatever. (Half the time, it's something you're never going to need.)

The state is trying to keep its 2-year-old law strong, despite attempts to weaken it. People - more than 80 percent of the state's residents signed up - are being reminded to re-enlist, and the state is asking them to register on a Web site to keep the state from being forced to loosen its law to match federal standards.

And a legislator is trying to get it extended to cell phones. Anything which keeps cell phones from going off in mid-anything is worth supporting, in my view. And it may be that the telemarketers have helped chase people to cell phones, as well as unlisted numbers.

I realize how aggravated people get, but it's not something that was high on my list of aggravations. It was behind, say, commercials for hygiene products, the slowness of snowplows in my apartment parking lot, and the kids upstairs who have a bass speaker that doubles as a device to send signals through the earth's crust to submarines in the Pacific Ocean.

That is, until Tuesday, when I realized that, personal aggravation aside, it could be used to block blithering idiots.

Look, I get a lot of stupid calls in this job, although most of them are on the level of "when is your Sunday paper published?"

But this one took the cake. And it starts about three weeks ago.

I took a call from an outgoing guy who identified himself as Joe Somebody from Something Energy. "I haven't talked to you for a while!" he enthused as I tried to remember who in heck he was. "That's cause I had a heart attack!" (The man spoke in exclamation points!) "Happened while I was out playing golf!"

I muttered appropriate sympathies as he continued: "Luckily I made it but I had to have a triple bypass! Boy, I sure learned the only thing that matters is your health!"

And then it came: "I was going to stop by and drop off this carving set for you! I was also going to bring some information about..."

Having heard pitchmen good and bad (and having been one for a week in college, before I realized I'm lousy at sales), I stopped him, said I didn't buy squat for our business, and wished him well. And hung up. Quickly.

Fast forward to Tuesday. The office phone rang. "Hi! I haven't talked to you for a while! This is..." Yup. The same tone, maybe not the same guy, but the same message. If not word for word, the same basic idea, right down to the triple bypass and the golf game. And when he got to the carving set, I interrupted. I might have interrupted sooner, but the sheer gall of the heart attack move and his enthusiasm in selling it were both rather impressive.

"Uh, you called me a few weeks ago," I said. "I did! I don't think so!" he replied.

"Well, if you didn't, there are a lot of heart attacks going on in that place," I responded. "Because somebody called me with the exact same script. Good health and good bye."

We're a business, and we can't go on the no-call list. But if he calls again - or another of his weak-hearted co-workers calls, I have my plan all set.

Him: "Hi! I haven't talked to you in a while!"

Me: "Oh yeah, heart attack, right? Well, I've got something to say to you. (shouting into the mouthpiece) BOO!"

Getting Up Early to Do My Duty

November 29, 2002

The alarm went off at 7 a.m., an hour earlier than usual and way too early after covering a meeting that went past midnight the night before. I mashed the snooze button and cursed the two words that were making me get up that early.

Jury duty.

I had been warned about a month earlier that I was picked to show up twice, two weeks apart, and that I should call a number the night before to learn where and when to report.

The first date was a false alarm, and I was able to stay home.

But the second time, I called and got the word: Judge Warpinski, Branch 2. 8:30 a.m.

Along with the summons, the county sends out a booklet with information on what to wear, where to park (free in the Pine Street ramp) and, especially, the proper attitude to take.

My wife suggested that if I really wanted to get out of it, I should take along one of our stuffed “children,” a stuffed hedgehog named Groundhog. The plan was for the two of us — Groundhog and me, not my wife and me — to enter the jury room talking about the attitude to take

during the trial. (Me: "I certainly can be unbiased; can't you, Groundhog?" Groundhog: "Fry 'em all! String 'em up!")

It might have been a bad idea. Groundhog would have been bored and really started to act up.

I arrived at about 8:15 a.m. (parking in The News-Chronicle lot and walking over) and quickly found the first-floor jury room. It's a bit dingy, with government-green walls, hard pews (as in other courtrooms) and a calendar on the wall that read 2002 but looked like it hadn't been changed since 1936. When not used for juries, it seemed to be a room used to store additional chairs.

Slowly, we filtered in, filling the pews to capacity. The bailiffs entered, in business dress, not uniforms. They answered questions, handed out parking passes for the ramp and ordered us to sign the roster to get our \$16 plus mileage (the mileage already noted on the form).

There were 32 of us there with five missing. There was some conversation, but most of us just sat there.

At 8:47, the bailiffs escorted us up to Branch 2. There, again, we sat in the gallery at the back, filling it. The chatter seemed a bit subdued now, in the actual courtroom, as we couldn't help glancing at the jury box where 12 of us might sit that day. Clerks scurried in and out, checking on who was there and who wasn't.

And then Judge Mark Warpinski came out and told us ... our services would not be required. It seemed there had been a last-minute plea bargain.

"Seeing you out here gives (the defense) the assumption we're ready to proceed," he told us. "That's something for the defense to take into consideration.

"If it were in my budget, I'd buy you all breakfast."

And we were sent home.

Not that I would have been kept around. Newspaper people are generally not picked for juries; after all, we're not supposed to know about the case, and we're not supposed to talk about it. Two strikes right there.

But I sort of wish I had been able to follow the case to conclusion. Besides, I always wanted to be the "lone juror" fighting for the right.

Although every time I think of that, I also think of an old episode of "All in the Family" where Edith Bunker was in just that role, and Archie, hearing the news that "a lone juror" was holding up the decision, growled "they shoulda said lone dingbat."

Partitions Don't Let Us See Relationships

November 15, 2002

It was interesting to see news reports on Monday's Ray Charles holiday concert at the Resch Center.

The audience members interviewed were all enthusiastic, all full of praise for Charles. And all were overwhelmingly older (not to mention white, but that's a given in Green Bay).

It was the second or third time in recent days that I've been reminded that we have more in common than we sometimes want to admit.

Another came Tuesday morning, as we stopped (as my wise wife often stops) at the country music channel.

On came a video by ... Bruce Springsteen?

The third came with the finding, while cleaning desks, of an old cassette tape, one half of which had a poor quality recording of the long-gone WYNE AM 1150 out of Appleton. (The station was closed several years ago when WHBY took over the 1150 frequency). Obviously taped off a radio with a microphone (I could hear myself in the background), it carried a half-hour of early-1970s Top 40, with quite a variety of sounds and even a newscast.

All three reminded me of the separation we seem to have these days. Instead of a family watching TV together and learning from each other (at least learning

what each family member thinks is funny), we have as many sets as there are people. The kids are in their room with Nickelodeon or Cartoon Network; the teens with MTV, the parents noting who is whacking whom on “The Sopranos,” the older folks, if they are there, watching TV Land reruns, or maybe a classic-movie channel.

The same goes for music. In 1971, you could hear a Top 40 station play everything from country picker Jerry Reed (“When You’re Hot, You’re Hot”) to the Partridge Family. Now, put something on that isn’t part of a strict format (adult contemporary, dance, hip-hop, alternative) and the dials turn.

But when you think of it, isn’t Bruce Springsteen something of a Johnny Cash for a new generation? Rebellious, introspective, speaking with an Everyman’s voice about eternal truths and our times.

Cash sang of being the “Man in Black;” Springsteen’s video on CMT told of a “Lonesome Day” in relation to the time after the Sept. 11 attacks. It’s a pretty straight line, really. And yet, it’s still jarring to see Springsteen in a country ghetto (and come to think of it, until recently, it was getting strange to see any “pure” country artists in a genre more and more dominated by slick faux-country pop.)

CMT has been doing some of this lately, mixing such similar styles as brothers-under-the-Jack-Daniels-label Kid Rock and Hank Williams Jr. It’s a good lesson.

Which I should have remembered about Ray Charles. To a lot of today's audience, he's an oldie; a golden one, perhaps, but still something out of the past. The hip-hop generation probably wouldn't understand how "What'd I Say" was a raw cry in its time, or how Charles could turn the board-straight country song "I Can't Stop Loving You" into a classic soul ballad.

So I guess that's my holiday suggestion for you if you've heard about Grandma and that reindeer once too often. If you like one type of music, try another. If you're into classical, check out alternative. If you like hiphop, give bluegrass a try.

They're all closer than you think.

Connecting the Plots

July 7, 2003

This is a story about a photograph, a football player, a journey and some odd connections. Maybe it's all coincidence, and I'm reading too much into it.

But it's a journey.

It started in 1964, when Morris Berman, a photographer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, covered the Steelers- Giants game. He decided to focus on the Giants' quarterback, Y.A. Tittle.

Late in the game, Tittle went back to pass, was sacked and fumbled. Berman took a photograph of Tittle in the end zone on his knees, blood streaming down his stunned face. It was Tittle's last game.

The photograph won several awards and was picked by Sports Illustrated as one of the top sports photographs of the century.

Recently, a TV show looked back at those top photographs, including Berman's. My wife, who is not a big football fan, was touched by the photo, and wanted a copy of it. At the very least, she wanted to see it again.

When she heard it was hanging in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, she added the hall to our next vacation.

We arrived there earlier this month, only to find the exhibit in which the picture was hanging had been taken down to make space for an exhibit on National Football League players who fought in wartime, and the NFL's response to the Sept. 11 attacks.

A worthy display, albeit disappointing to my wife. She asked a clerk at the museum's souvenir store what had happened. The clerk was nice enough to let my wife know where she could get a copy.

Then, almost a week later, a story came over the Associated Press wire:

PHOENIX - Morris Berman, whose photograph of a bloodied Y.A. Tittle kneeling in the end zone ranks among the most famous images in sports history, has died. He was 92.

And they ran the photo on the wire, of course.

I printed out a copy for my wife and chuckled. Because if this all proves anything, it's that we don't always get what we want, but we may get something just as good.

My wife didn't get to see the photograph when she wanted to, but now she has her own copy. Me? I got a nice vacation stop.

And for the late Mr. Berman, there was recognition, of course. The photograph has won many awards. And it still holds its power.

But Berman always said that if the photo had run the day after the game, he would have won the Pulitzer Prize.

You see, when Berman took his photos back to his sports editor, the editor decided not to run the photograph.

He said it "didn't have any action in it."

A Wannabe Genius Asks For Attention (or Abuse)

October 11, 2001

Sometimes, I wonder if being a columnist is all it's stacked up to be. I mean, am I reaching anybody? Is my prose being parsed?

Or am I typing lines that head for the void between the perch and the bottom of the bird cage?

Well, I do get a few letters now and then, and I'm thankful for that. It's nice to know something you've done - writing or not - affects someone.

But lately, I've been getting worried. Just this week, I had three reminders that I'm swimming in the journalistic backwaters. For example, I didn't get an anthrax letter.

Tom Brokaw got an anthrax letter. So did Peter Jennings and Dan Rather. The New York Post (remember "Headless Body in Topless Bar"?) got a letter. Heck, the Weekly World News got a letter, obviously from enemies of news about 500-pound babies.

So now I know my position on the journalistic food chain - somewhere below the publishers of news about space aliens endorsing Al Gore. (And see what good it did him. Do they have hanging chads on Mars?) All right, so anthrax is serious. Although I don't think any anthrax could survive on my desk.

But I'm still jealous.

And as if that wasn't a big enough blow, I was passed over - again - for the MacArthur Foundation "genius grants."

Well, of course I qualify. Hey, one of the awards went to Jean Strouse of New York, who has written biographies of Alice James and J.P. Morgan.

Well, I used to watch "The Gong Show" when Jaye P. Morgan was a panelist, and that's pretty close.

I mean, look at the winners. A concert pianist? A pilot who researches Mexico's wildlife? A scholar on punishment in classical Athens?

Worthy work, of course, but can any of them tell you who played quarterback for the Packers in 1972? I'll bet you none of them known how to grill bratwurst.

All I can figure is the judges don't read The News-Chronicle on Fridays. But the sharpest cut came Tuesday, delivered by one of my fellow columnists. Two, actually.

Turns out Warren Bluhm(*) wrote something Bill LuMaye(**) didn't like, and LuMaye spent most of the next day's radio show knocking Bluhm off the right-field wall.

Darn, I was jealous. I wanna be ripped to shreds on the air. Anything to get this column read by the masses.

Problem is, I'm not controversial enough. There are never any angry posts in the News-Chronicle online forums suggesting I be sent back to wherever I came from. There are no angry missives demanding my head on a platter.

So, I'll have to get controversial, rev up my invective, say something that will make me a pariah in the public discourse. Here goes...

"Bill LuMaye, you're a pooppyhead."

There, that ought to do it.

(*) Our managing editor at the time, more libertarian than conservative.

(**) The local radio station's Rush Limbaugh wanna-be, who, last I heard, was in Richmond, Va.

Waiting For the Call From Alex

April 18, 2001

CHICAGO - Now entering the ballroom was today's contestant: A copy editor and somewhat-befuddled columnist from Green Bay, Wis., Ray Barrington!

Ah, dreams of glory. They're what I was chasing on Tuesday.

My wife and I were in Chicago to try out for "Jeopardy!" (And yes, the exclamation point is important - they even addressed the letters to me with Ray Barrington! as the recipient.)

We had signed up at the show's Web site in February after seeing that tryouts would be held in Chicago in April. First, they called my wise wife, who was wise enough not to use it against me. Then, a week later, my call.

It's a shame we couldn't play as a team; her interests are different from mine, and together we can clean anybody's trivia clock, at least if the games at Damon's and Coaches Corner are any indication.

The letters followed, with directions to the Michigan Avenue hotel and instructions on what to wear (dress as if you were going to be on the show).

So there we were, about 75 of us on the sort of uncomfortable chairs you find in hotel ballrooms. A "contestant coordinator" welcomed us, and the multimedia test began.

First, we were handed our tools: A sheet on which to write the answers, another sheet on which to list five interesting things about ourselves (for those interviews Alex Trebek does after the first few questions), and an official "Jeopardy!" stick pen.

We then were shown a tape of Trebek and the show's "Clue Crew" welcoming us to the tryout, giving us hints (you don't have to answer in the form of a question, you should guess because you might be right, and have fun), and then the test.

That's 50 questions, all hard-level "Jeopardy!" ones. I can't repeat them here (don't want to give away the answers) but they're typical of the show.

How hard? As we watched more adventures of the "Clue Crew," they graded the tests.

Of 75 of us, only eight passed.

My wife, a woman of above-average intelligence (at least in picking husbands), didn't make it. Most didn't. Somehow, I did. The others included a Methodist minister, a lawyer, and a law student wannabe.

(And that's scary. Do I want to be defended by somebody citing "Webster vs. Potent Potables?")

Those of us left had our pictures taken, did more paperwork (do you know anybody connected with the show, Sony, your local TV station, or who has ever used a telephone?) and had the fun of playing an actual "Jeopardy!" game, complete with board and buzzers.

And it isn't as easy as it looks. Mastering the buzzers alone is a skill. The answer is read, a small light flashes, and only then can you ring in. Of the 20 or so questions in our mini-game, I rang in on three. (At least I got them all right.)

And now? They have my name, and all I can do is wait for the call from Hollywood.

The kicker: They ain't paying for any of it. I paid for our transportation to Chicago; if I'm called, I pay to go to L.A.

So why?

Well, there are challenges one must face. Climbers must conquer Everest. Runners, the Olympics. Politicians dream of the White House. And for trivial minds like mine, there is that dream at night of Trebek - with the mustache back - intoning: "And our returning champion ..."

Oh, deer, this space is getting crowded

March 12, 2003

Look, I'm a large guy, and this space is getting cramped.

Last weekend, somebody came in and both raised the ceiling and lowered the floor, and now I'm getting a bit claustrophobic. Used to be, I had a lot of head room. Now, I bump my noggin every time I get up for some duck tape to strap up a split infinitive.

And there's no room to pick up any dangling participles, much less let them dangle.

It's just that after some 15 years at this place, we're suddenly missing a half-inch, and it seems like more. Maybe those skinny folks like Yvonne and LuMaye can fit on these pages. I can't.

It's as if somebody came into my house in the middle of the night and took about five square feet out of each room. There's going to be a lot of walking into walls.

But I guess I can't complain. (And what good would it do?) After all, this is being done so that we match some sort of national standards, and I like standards, especially "I Left My Heart in San Francisco."

So I will have to get used to a page that looks sorta squat and flat.

After all, I should have known when I moved in what the neighborhood was like. You know, sorta like those people on the East Side, who wanted the convenience of living close to the city but not that close. So they move into an area that used to be country.

And darned if the country isn't still living next to them.

You see, nobody told the deer they were suddenly being zoned residential. (And here's a surprise; they don't cross exactly at "deer crossing" signs, either.)

So the deer keep doing what deer do; foraging, nibbling, existing. Can't blame 'em.

But it seems they keep getting in the way of the folks who moved out there. Of course, that seems to be our way; if we want something, whatever was there will have to go.

Ask Native Americans.

Or Kaap's.

Or the odd Pacific atoll used as an A-bomb test site.

Not that the deer would say "we were here first; get used to it."

They're pretty shy creatures. Maybe the bucks boast a little, back in the closed world of deer, about managing to outwit some Elmer Fudd in his bright orange suit.

But that's about it.

So the deer are being crowded out, and there isn't much to say about it. Which is good, cause there isn't as much room here to say it.

New Museum Leaves Beauty - and envy

November, 2001

I didn't want to work on a newspaper, you know.
But it seemed to be the only thing anybody was willing to
pay me to do.

Maybe it's the mid-life crisis in me trying to get out.
Maybe it's just wanting to do something more permanent
than put words on cheap paper.

But once again, I'm having these dreams about
being an architect.

Granted, dreams are all they are. Every time I think
about it, I remember I have two shortcomings that would,
much to the pleasure of those who want to see buildings
stay standing, keep me from that dream.

For one thing, I can't draw a straight line.

For another, I barely made it through "dummy
math" in college, just the three credits needed to get my
degree.

I'm OK on balancing a checkbook or figuring out a
point spread. But throw those X's and Y's in there, and I'm
hopelessly lost.

So I'd never have made it.

But the dreams come back now and then, and they've been especially strong in the past week or so.

That's because of the new wing of the Milwaukee Art Museum. You've seen the pictures of the building, looking like a cross between a bird, a sailboat and the Sydney Opera House.

A convertible, wing-flapping, cable-stayed beauty.

And boy, does the envy flow through me. This guy, Santiago Calatrava, has taken steel and cable and made something truly impressive, something unique, something beautiful in a city where most of the buildings seem to want to be small brothers of the 1880s City Hall.

The most amazing thing? There was little controversy. Around here, controversy goes with everything, including parking ramps.

So to put this dream figure on the lakeshore, to put something so recognizable in Milwaukee, of all places, seems to be a little miracle.

I haven't been down there yet, although I did see it while it was being built. You knew then, just from the drawings and from the skeleton hanging over Lake Michigan, that it would be special.

It soars, it swoops, it seems to fly. And yet, from what I have read, it still handles its primary function - that of holding the art collection inside - as well as any plain box.

Milwaukee got lucky, very lucky, in having people with the foresight to agree to such a work.

And me? I just wish I could leave something like that behind.

Guess I'll have to stick to my plan B - putting my initials in wet cement.

\

Am I Syndicated Yet?

May 9, 2003

Well, hello, Denmark! I haven't had the chance to welcome you into the columnar fold yet. But I understand that some of my columns have been running in The Denmark Press.

So welcome aboard. Hope you've enjoyed the columns so far; hope you keep coming back; hope you let me know how I'm doing. Won't be here every week, but keep an eye open for me now and then.

Working for The News-Chronicle for all these years, I've spent a lot of time in Denmark, of course; I've visited (and closed down) some of your finer drinking establishments. Things have changed a bit since I started there, but not too much.

And this column isn't going to consist of laughs at your expense. You see, I grew up in Hortonville, which was much like Denmark - one main street, the usual amount of schools, more than the usual amount of bars. I grew up across from the local feed mill, owned by the dad of one of my friends.

When, in college, I had to make a short film for a class, I took a camera and did a music video to Simon and Garfunkel's "My Little Town," with appropriate shots for each lyric.

"In my little town, I never meant nothing/I was just my father's son," went one line. And for that, I shot film of all the family-owned establishments in town - Arendt's Meat Market, Charlie's A&W, Huss' Lakeside Foods, Murphy Ford, Griesbach's Garage, McHugh's Tap.

And if small towns like Hortonville - and Denmark - mean anything, it's that sense of family in a community.

I ended up marrying a small-town girl (the "wise wife" you see mentioned here occasionally). It came as a surprise only because the family was laying odds I'd never get married. But when I did, it was to a girl who was from a similar small town, only in Georgia (fewer bars, more beauty parlors).

And it's the same thing. We have that world view in common; we don't always see business as BUSINESS; we see it as people making a living. We don't expect people to rip us off, because they know how much we make and that we can't afford to be ripped off.

So there's a natural distrust, I guess, of the "big city." I'm in Green Bay now, which only qualifies as a "big city" if you're from Denmark or Hortonville or Ringgold, Ga., I presume. And in Green Bay, we view Chicago or Milwaukee as the big cities.

Well, we are what we are, and for both you, dear Denmark reader, and me, that's a small-town person. (Cue

the John Cougar Mellencamp music here.) I just worry that the small towns aren't going to be there after a while.

Hortonville is rapidly becoming a suburb of Appleton; Ringgold is dominated by its businesses catering to the travelers on nearby I-75 with motels and fast-food joints.

And Denmark? Well, it also has an interstate nearby; not as traveled as I-75 perhaps, but still a catalyst. It's far enough from Green Bay to avoid being swept up into its orbit, but that may change as De Pere and Ledgeview continue their growth.

Villages like this grew as centerpieces for farmers, the place to go on Saturdays to pick stuff up and meet with neighbors. With corporate farms, that role is dying.

So Denmark, the Denmark you grew up with, is changing, too. It's a question of whether the real Denmark - the attitudes of the people who grew up there and still love the place - will change as well.

Taking Sports Just a Bit Too Seriously

January 17, 2003

Welcome to the last column of November, and you all know what that means: Christmas shopping.

I have been in a near-fatal car accident; I have had five root canals; I even got married. In my wife's home state. With only my sister and her family on my side of the aisle against all her family and friends if trouble broke out (it didn't).

But there is one event each year that traumatizes me more than all of the above, and that is shopping between Thanksgiving and Dec. 25. I do admit to the occasional road rage, to the venting of frustration now and then.

But put me in a store in December, and I become a maniac.

It starts slowly, my anger building as I circle the parking lot like a runner in a 10-kilometer race, seeing the same scenery dozens of times, before finally finding a spot at the farthest possible point from any door.

That gets me in a wonderful mood.

So after hiking across the asphalt - it's December, remember, so the odds of snow and cold are at least 90 percent - I enter the next circle of hell.

It is not claustrophobic in a mall in December.
That's reserved for submarines and small airplanes, and
the occasional mine shaft. It is vicious.

Children, on a sugar buzz and excited to see Santa,
dart about at knee level between people carrying more
packages than a herd of bellboys.

Adults, most in no better of a mood than I, grumble
as they watch their charges and charge watches.

And that's in the main traffic area. Enter a store,
with narrow aisles, and it gets worse.

Want to avoid that by going to a big-box retailer?
It's no different.

I have found myself wanting to slam my shopping
cart into someone idly standing in an aisle, blocking all
traffic, but then I stop myself and remember the poor
person is probably in shock, with that thousand-yard stare
one sees on a battle fatigue victim.

I try to keep my energy going by humming a little
ditty to myself, sung to the tune of the fast part of the
Olympics theme:

"I hate this, I hate this, I really, really hate this..."

Eventually, and often to my surprise, it ends.
Presents are bought, and now all I have to do is wrap,
tape, tear, cut, curse, stack and deliver.

And, I hope, see the smiles when the presents are opened.

Darn it, they'd BETTER smile.

Trip Takes Over the Column For a Week

December 17, 2004

Hello! They call me Trip, although my full name is Galloping Grey Ghost. I've had a strange week, and it's being completed by my having to do this column while my new dad (who's going to get the credit for it) checks into the Mental Health Center after a bout of Christmas shopping. I've been told not to worry because it happens to him every year.

But it isn't any stranger than my week, which began with somebody dropping me off at the Bay Area Humane Society and Animal Shelter. It's a very nice place, really, but I'm not sure why I was there. I heard something about "stray" but I knew where I was going, although I can't remember now.

Oh, I should explain, I'm a kitten, all of eight weeks old. And yes, I'm grey. My sister came along with me, although she isn't with me now, and I miss her. But I don't know if my new place could handle two of us. And I'm sure someone will find her just as they found me.

Anyway, there I was, with a slight cold, with my sister in a nice little cage. They kept us warm and dry and gave us food and cleaned our litter box, but I like to run. And you can't do much running in a little cage.

Occasionally, someone would come and play with us. I liked that. But they always left and I went back into the cage.

Until this week. There's been this couple — the guy whose picture you see here is one of them — who have come in three or four times, but they always played with the other kittens. I wished they'd play with me; they seemed nice. But they were taken with an orange kitten they called "Hannibal," because he'd nibble on their fingers.

I guess that's a joke from a movie, but I don't get out much.

They seemed very sad when they learned somebody else had taken Hannibal home, but they came and played with other kittens. Never with me, though. And then the lady looked at me and smiled. She couldn't play with me, because the shelter has rules about not handling more than one cat. It spreads disease, they say, so I'm all for the rule.

But she talked to somebody on duty, and on Wednesday, they were both back. They talked to the woman at the counter, and before you know it, I was out of my cage and being held by both of them. They're fun, they like to scratch me on the chin, and I paid them back with my Class A purr.

It worked. They signed some papers and put me in a small cage. I went outside — it's cold out now — and got to ride in their van. I heard them talking about what to call me. He wanted Nosy, because I kept hitting his nose, trying to get that other cat I could see in his glasses. But she liked Grey Ghost.

When I went into their house, they opened the little cage. I poked my nose out cautiously, and found I had ROOM! I spent the next 10 minutes just running around, looking at everything, and they were laughing. I think they like me. They must because they even put a little tree in the house for me to climb in, and hung pretty colored balls on it for me to knock off and chase. They break pretty easy, though.

As for the name, they had finally decided on Galloping Grey Ghost, because I ran so fast, and decided that was too long, so they shortened it to Triple G. Then I started playing with his shoes as he was walking, so he shortened it even more, to Trip.

Trip. I like that. It's nice to have a name. It's even nicer to have a home.

And, apparently, a job. Although he tells me he'll be just fine next week.

Sadly, Trip died of an enlarged heart on March 11, 2008. He is still missed.

The Annual Family Letter

December 24, 2004

Editor's note: Mr. Barrington is continuing his recuperation in a secluded location from his annual bout of Christmas shopping. Doctors report the twitching has stopped, but there are loud screams now and then.

However, his annual family Christmas letter did arrive in a card at the editorial page offices. Since his cat, Trip, who filled in last week, refuses to write any more columns unless he gets more Kitten Chow, we do the only thing we can do: print the letter.

Hello to all,

Well, ho-ho-ho and all that jazz. I'm writing this in November, because it takes time to get copies made, printed and bound and run them all through the post office. But I'm sure it will be worth it. Besides, you know how I get in December.

The wife and I are still doing fine. The word "divorce" has never been mentioned. The word "murder" has, but only by her, so that's already an improvement from last year.

We continue to have visitors all the time, keeping us from being bored and lonely, and so this letter is

dedicated to you, our creditors, unwanted salespeople and friends of obscure religious figures. Happy whatever it is you celebrate.

Oh, and we were kept busy answering doorbells and ringing phones from all the political people who were traipsing through this year. I thought it was a bit much when that nice Sen. Kerry offered to stay overnight, although he did offer to wash the dishes. It was strange, though, that after accidentally cutting his finger on a knife in the sink, he asked for a Purple Heart. And that nice Mr. Cheney was fun as well, although it was strange having to answer the phone for a day with "hello, undisclosed location."

The phone calls were fun, too - I think we talked to six stars from CBS shows, three from NBC and five NFL Hall of Famers. Of course, they didn't talk back, but that's normal in politics.

We paid our annual visit to her family in Georgia. That's always a nice trip, although this year's election made it more difficult, what with all the red-state, blue-state checkpoints at the border. And I think confiscating my copy of the New York Times as we entered Tennessee was a bit much.

We saw my sister-in-law's 2-year-old, who is just learning to talk. He's going to look back and wonder why "swiftboat" was his first word.

Of course, we're always excited about the Packers here, especially now that they're giving the rest of the league a chance by showing up without a defense. We even went to a game this fall, after gathering money from political types by calling ourselves "Cheeseheads For Truth."

But mostly, we just relax here in our split-level apartment. It isn't really a split level, but all the junk we get sorta piles on one side. Then again, we're doing the same thing thanks to all those new fast-food joints in town.

Green Bay hasn't changed much, except that all the new building in town is being done by banks, probably because they're getting plenty of money from the football players.

In short, we survived the usual round of insanity this year, and are stronger for it. At least for now. Oops, I spoke too soon. The wife is riffling through the credit cards in her wallet like a dealer on the World Poker Tour, and I sense shopping ahead. All I can do is stay still and hope she doesn't see me ... oops, too late.

She's humming Christmas music, and I must go.
Help!

Happy holidays, Ray

Several Simply Simple Roads to Simplifying

March 23, 2001

Who among us has not, in the fullness of our busy lives, tried to make time for the things in which we have so much emotional involvement - and failed? We all cry out our mantra, "Simplify! Simplify!" and do it so often as to leave it as a complication by itself.

Therefore I, your Simplify Your Living columnist, have arrived, to carry you, kicking and screaming, from the drudgery of your everyday, complicated living into a new and peaceful world, where all is calm and bright, for we have learned the secret to ... Simplifying!

But oh Simplifying columnist, you cry out - and I have heard you - your suggestions seem impossible to attain, to make part of our complicated daily lives.

Nonsense. You weren't trying hard enough. Just look at all the things you can do.

Your job. How much of a complication is it to actually report to work and do all those things you are forced to do? Take note of how it makes your life a mess, having to devote all that time to projects that obviously don't have anything to do with you - say, if you are the nurse and have to take care of all those sick people who mean nothing to you.

It's truly easy. You just go to the boss and say, "Boss, my life is complicated, and it is because of you. I want to work fewer hours, and maybe work from home, and in general spend less time on all of this."

And your boss will agree! They all do, of course. They really don't need people to hold up walls while carpenters work on them, or police to chase bad guys. It's obvious that whatever work you do, be it fireman, doctor or air traffic controller, the public safety must play a poor second to your need to Simplify.

Granted, you may have a boss who will respond to your request - after a half-hour of hearty laughter, choking, wheezing and cries of "stop, you're killing me here!" - by firing you.

This allows you to reach your goal! Now you have 40 or more hours each week to devote to Simplifying Your Living. And you will do so without the added burden of needing to put paychecks in the bank.

This leads to even further Simplifying. Soon, you will lose your home - many hours of time-consuming housework gone - and then your family.

Now, you will have even more time and space to devote to what's really important - YOU.

Why deal with a strong, warm house when nature provides its own shelter, the humble but simple cave. Scrounging around fabric shops (bring your own needle

and thread!) can lead to some simple but interesting clothing designs.

And your lack of indoor plumbing will soon lead to even more Simplifying, as your friends and acquaintances desert you to seek fresh air. There goes all that wasted time sending Christmas cards, which is the bane of my life!

So now, your life will truly be Simplified. You can spend your life as I do, huddling in a cave away from all contact, staring at your navel.

I realize I have just described the life of a hermit, but you may find other descriptions.

THE SIMPLE MAILBAG

Dear Simplifying Your Living: I live on a farm, where the main work of my day is milking several dozen head of cattle. How can I go about Simplifying? - **Farmer just outside Hortonville.**

Dear Farmer: The secret is not in ending the milking, but in Simplifying it. I have two suggestions. One is to switch from cows to goats, as they take up much less pace. The other is to switch to boy cows, thus cutting milking time to near zero!

Chapter 9:

SAYING GOODBYE

It seems appropriate to close with some farewells to family, friends, and finally, the newspaper that ran what you've been reading, The Green Bay News-Chronicle.

The pay was terrible, we had nowhere near the tools or resources to do the job, our printing plant was a half-hour away at a time when there was no such thing as computer transmission of completed pages), and we were overworked six days a week.

I still miss the place.

White Made Green Bay Feel Wanted

December 27, 2004

The first thing I noticed is how quick he was, quicker than anyone his size I had ever seen. And considering how much time I've spent around football players, that's saying something.

The second thing I noticed was in the locker room, where he quickly became the leader, the go-to guy, whether it was cracking everybody up with an impersonation of Muhammad Ali or simply showing that somebody with his talent could still do the work it took to be even better.

It's hard to remember just how much Reggie White, who died unexpectedly Sunday, meant to the Packers and this community.

We've become a bit spoiled in this town with success in football. The current coach, Mike Sherman, just won his third straight NFC division title, during a season in which some fans were calling for his exit.

It's hard to remember that in 1993, the Packers had been in the playoffs only twice in 26 years — and one of those was an expanded, 16-team system after a strike.

At about that time, David Harris wrote a book about the ownership of the National Football League, dismissing the Packers as "irrelevant."

It wasn't that long before that Frank Deford, in Sports Illustrated, wrote of the James Lofton and Mossy Cade trials, and summed up that it was time to move the team to Milwaukee, because no blacks would want to play in Green Bay when free agency came.

In fact, Green Bay had been the league's poster boy for fighting free agency. "Who would want to go there?" other owners asked.

But free agency came, and White was its first big name. He saw more red carpet than a rug cleaner would see in a year. He wanted to play someplace where he could win a Super Bowl and help urban youth, he said.

And for reasons unknown, he signed here.

It's hard to remember the euphoria over that signing. Finally, someone wanted us, believed in us, said there could be a winner here, and was willing to stake his career on it.

Maybe the Packers would, eventually, have won a Super Bowl without Reggie White, although they haven't come close since he left.

But it's doubtful that 1996 team would have done so without the spark that White brought, both in uniform and in the locker room. He was not a standoffish superstar; he was a man who wore his emotions on his sleeve.

I know of no other player who has signed with this team whose arrival led to large billboards bidding him welcome.

It was appropriate that he was a minister; he had a personality that made you want to believe ... want to believe that he could come back after a torn hamstring ... believe that the Packers could win.

Because he made it happen.

It's a shame that much of that was overshadowed by one stupid speech; most of us say plenty of stupid things that get ignored. Such are the perils of being a famous person; people automatically believe anything you say has value.

And it almost hurts to write that. For as much as fans around here love Brett Favre and LeRoy Butler and the other stars of those great teams, there was something unique about Reggie.

We were the minister's chosen people, and that will never be forgotten.

A Small World - and a Sadder One

November 26, 2004

I really wasn't sure if I could believe what I was reading. We had just received news of the death of Benjamin Edinger, a local kid who was a Marine and had been wounded in Iraq. In looking up anything we could find to add to our story on the death, I noticed his grandmother's name, which also happened to be the name of the wife of my mom's former boss.

I called, hesitantly. Yes, it was her. I hadn't seen the former boss since my mom's funeral back in 2001. I expressed my sympathies and got to work doing my job, asking questions about the young man. I did my story and went home.

There have been five people from the area killed since the fighting began in Iraq. This is the second one to which my family has a tie, albeit distant. When Nichole Frye of Lena was killed last year, my wife worked with one of her friends.

I know it's not the same as having a family member die, and my wife and I didn't know the individuals who died. But even a tenuous connection vibrates with meaning.

This one was closer. I grew up in my mom's workplace, using it as a base from which to spend summer days in Appleton, hitting stores or other activities, then

hooking back up with her for the ride home. So her bosses in the law office where she worked became something of additional family, although we have only slightly kept in touch since she retired. All four were there for her funeral three years ago.

Most journalists will tell you that for all the joys of this job - and there are many - there is one job that is universally disliked. That's asking the families of the recently deceased for information almost immediately after the death. I've had to do it a few times, and it's never easy.

But when it's someone you know - well, that's a whole new degree of difficulty. And while part of me is trying to be professional, the other part is concerned for my old friends, hoping they're doing OK, adding my condolences along with my questions.

I'm not telling you this to ask for sympathy; as the old cartoon theme song said, "you knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

But it does bring home the fact that these are not faceless casualties of battle, but young men and women with families and friends, plans and dreams, who will never see their futures.

This is not the place to argue if they were sent for the right reasons; whether the war they're fighting in is right and proper. That can be done elsewhere and at other

times, and it's a debate - contrary to what our leaders would have you believe - that should continue. For the cost of war is seen in days like this, when one young man is buried and another dies, when acquaintances are renewed in the saddest of times.

The families of those who died - I've now had the chance to talk to a few - are uniformly proud of their sons and daughters. They should be. Sacrifice should never be put down.

That's one lesson we learned from Vietnam; no matter what we think of the cause, respect those who are fighting for it, for they are willing to do something so many of us aren't. They are people just like you and me.

And that, as much as a distant friendship, is the real reason we should all mourn their loss.

On Not Missing Dad on Father's Day

June 15, 2001

It was my Dad who tried to explain the divorce, which was ridiculous. After all, how do you explain a divorce to a 9-year-old?

So I stayed with my Mom, and he moved away. He'd visit regularly, and he never failed with the support checks. He caught a foul ball at a Brewers game, drawing on his old skills as a town team catcher; I still have it.

But as I went to college, the contacts faded. His second wife, the one he left Mom for, died, and he went on to his third, back in his hometown. And I went on to Indiana, then back to Wisconsin and eventually to Green Bay.

It was relationship-by-Hallmark, with him having a slight advantage; we both got birthday and Christmas cards; he also got a Father's Day card.

And that was about it, until a day in 1987 when his third wife called and said Dad was in the hospital, seriously ill. He had injured his head in a fall. He recovered physically, somewhat, but never mentally; he'd recognize me, then talk to the imaginary person next to me.

He hung on until 1997, and then he was gone; we buried him in his hometown, near his mother and old

friends, with his old teammates nearby, and put a stone above his head with a catcher's mitt engraved on it.

It wasn't that he wasn't a good father; he worked hard, made sure we had all we needed, drove the car on family vacations.

And then one day he was out the door, and I didn't understand why.

I learned later, of course, and there were signs; the screams and shouts, the bruises on Mom's arm, the nights Dad didn't come home. If anything, I kept them together too long; I was ill, and Dad wasn't going to leave until I got better.

A good father, but at the end, no great shakes as a husband.

In a way, I miss him at a time like Father's Day, but then again, I stopped missing him a long time ago.

If you were expecting a happy Father's Day column, or even a sad one with how I miss a great role model, well, I'm sorry.

This is just the way one life went - and I have the feeling it's a little too typical.

For so many children today, family is a one-parent word, and that's not right. Yes, a divorce was probably the right thing in this case, before anything worse than arguing happened. And no one should stay in a truly abusive relationship.

But it's time to remember that the best thing for a child is a two-parent family. I hate to sound like a Bible-thumper, but it's what I know.

And maybe someday, somebody (probably at the card companies) will get the right idea, and ditch Mother's Day and Father's Day and start a day to honor the couples staying together, raising their children and getting it right.

Remembering Some Blarney That Left Us

March 5, 2004

I can't believe it's been 13 years since he left us.

There are few moments that truly stand out for me in all the years I've been at The News-Chronicle - when you work at a newspaper, things sort of blur together, especially after a year of covering water negotiations.

But this one stands out for all the wrong reasons.

I was standing at one end of the Brown County Arena on a Sunday morning, waiting for the first day of the old Mid-Continent Conference basketball tournament and for Tim Harty, who was also covering the event. Tim, his face stricken, found me in the crowd and told me "Pat O'Donahue died this morning."

And I was stricken, too, as were many readers of this paper when they found out.

For Pat may have been the most popular person ever to work at The News-Chronicle. It's been this long, and I still talk to people who remember him.

Pat was one of those people who seem to make an impression on everyone they meet.

First off - well, Lord, he WAS Irish. His funeral display included a picture of him kissing the Blarney Stone, as if we needed evidence he'd done that. They

carried him to his final reward in a green suit, and it wasn't something found for the occasion - it's one he'd wear to the office on a regular basis. His house - heck, his desk at the office - was nearly an Irish museum.

And that desk was the center of The News-Chronicle newsroom, because when Pat was there, there was usually a story to be told from one of his past career stops, at another newspaper or from his days driving a cab.

(Driving a cab, I'm beginning to think, may be as good a training ground for a reporter as journalism school. You may not get the writing practice, but you hear a lot of stories.)

And that is where I last saw him, telling stories and keeping the rest of the newsroom laughing, on a Friday afternoon. Not a bad last memory, that.

But he was more than a newsroom character. There were two other things about him. One was his working style. Because an accident during past surgery had damaged his eyesight, he used a tape recorder for every bit of note taking necessary. We all use recorders, but usually in crowds or as backstop. It's not as fast, but it didn't slow Pat one bit.

The other was his writing. Along with being a solid reporter who knew everybody in town, he was an entertaining writer. His "Sounding Board" columns were a

solid, interesting look at life in Green Bay, with more than a little of Pat himself involved.

He would write about the latest foibles of local pols one week, and about an old friend the next. He included himself, but never as the expert or pundit; more often, it was the friendly victim of what was affecting all of us.

And he self-mockingly promoted himself as a presidential candidate; I'm sure there are still a few "Patrick O'Donahue for President" pencils floating around the building.

We've had quite a few columnists since then, but Pat's still stay in the mind. And, I'll admit, they've probably influenced what I've done in this space.

When Pat left us, we did almost a full page of tributes to him, but as usual, Lyle Lahey summed it up best.

Lyle drew a saddened newsroom gathered around Pat's empty desk, with some entering and asking where Pat was.

The reply: "He went home for St. Patrick's Day."

Reagan in Oshkosh: Where Were the Tomatoes?

June 11, 2004

Not surprisingly, the Oshkosh Northwestern ran an article upon the death of Ronald Reagan remembering his 1985 visit to the city. Papers do that when a president or notable figure dies; I'm sure someday I'll write one about Gerald Ford dedicating the Packer Hall of Fame in 1976 when that former president goes to the Big 19th Hole in the Sky.*

What I thought was interesting is that the Northwestern mentioned only in passing that Reagan had campaigned there in 1976, in his unsuccessful race against Ford.

So pull up a chair, kids, and I'll tell you the story of the one time I saw Ronald Reagan.

It was January 1976, and Reagan was speaking at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. The campus was quiet, as it was "interim," a three-week term between semesters in which students with no life (like me) could take another class, three hours a day for three weeks. I'm sure it seemed like a good time to make a campus visit for the guy noted for his anti-radical stand in the 1960s.

Reagan's advance people had selected the old UW-O gym, Albee Hall - about the size of the Green Bay Southwest gym - and were only using half of it to make it look like a packed house. As it turned out, the advance

work stunk. A radical group called the Peoples Bicentennial Commission grabbed most of the seats, complete with the inevitable guy in a gorilla suit carrying a sign: "Bedtime for Reagan."

The advance team also hired a country band. Well, they thought it was a country band. It was a local Southern rock group, "Tackenridge County," which really got the crowd going when it swung into that old standby, "Panama Red." (Note to Gen Xers - this was a song about d-r-u-g-s.)

I snuck into the press area by not sneaking in. I walked up to the press table, complete with camera, and announced I was there from the New London Press-Star - the weekly I had written for in high school. (Note to the Secret Service: I think the statute of limitations has run out, and I promise not to do that again.) Thus credentialed, I stood on the camera platform next to the networks.

The hall was, indeed, packed, and the center divider was opened a bit to allow a few more folks to see, but it was still well beyond capacity.

Reagan came in to a chorus of boos and went into his regular stump speech. About 20 minutes in, the first snowball flew. Then a couple of others. The Secret Service was, well, nervous, and it wanted him out.

Then an egg flew. Reagan kept talking but it was clear the security folks were nudging him out. He finally

wrapped up and as he turned to go, an egg flew right at his ear.

A Secret Service man made a classic Brooks Robinson catch, and Reagan - who actually stopped to shake some hands on his way out - was gone.

I heard a voice behind me say "Where's a phone? I need a phone..." I turned around and it was Frank Reynolds of ABC, who reported that night that the incident showed Reagan would have trouble campaigning on colleges that year.

I'll let the historians dwell on Reagan's legacy or whether he was a good or bad president. I do want to say, however, that Nancy Reagan and the rest of the family have my deepest sympathy for their years of dealing with Alzheimer's disease. That's what took my mother, and as the stories came out about Reagan's last months, I read them with nods of familiarity, as I'm sure those of you who have had to deal with it did.

He did show courage on that day in Oshkosh, and his family has shown courage for the last 10 years, and no matter what you thought about Reagan's presidency, that courage should be honored.

On Wednesday, The Time Came

July 27, 2001

It was time. It had been time for many months.

It was time when the mind had failed, leaving only the body. The mind was fading before the hip went, but when the hip recovered, the mind didn't.

She didn't really know where she was or why she was there. She wanted to go home, but she never would.

And yet she fought on, her spirit at first undefeated. She recovered, and persevered with her usual humor and grace. She welcomed visits from family and cooed at babies.

But then she faded. She knew she was being kept someplace, but not where. She enjoyed rides to the doctor, but didn't understand why she was going.

And eventually, she didn't go any more. She slept more and more. She occasionally became angry, furious, kicking and pushing at others. It took medication to calm her, and time to figure out how much to keep a balance between lethargy and fear.

It may have been time then, but it wasn't.

he changed wards, to one with people with Alzheimer's, but it didn't help. She went back to the

regular ward in the nursing home, and slept some more, and was helped with food.

She would have said it was time, but it wasn't.

She had said so before, when she was active, and took care of kids and cats, and loved jokes and the occasional vodka, when she bowled and ran meetings and made friends so easily.

She said it would be time when she couldn't do all that. Even when she retired, and aches and pains kept her in the house most of the time, she was happy with her books, and taping movies.

And then the fall, and the pain, and the gradual descent.

Friday, a nurse called a son, and said she was failing. It was almost time.

Monday was her birthday, and it was almost time.

And Wednesday, gasping, she looked her son square in the eye, grasped as he said a last "I love you, Mom" and sagged.

Finally, it was time to be free.

It Was Two Years Ago Today

July 25, 2003

I still wonder if I handled it right.

Two years ago today, two days after turning 78 and not knowing it, my mother died. She died in a nursing home, with my wife and I there to say good bye, and my sister on the road from Milwaukee. I hope she knew we were there.

And in the two years since, I don't go a day without thinking of her. In my case, I wondered whether I handled those last years as well as I could have.

Could I have seen the Alzheimer's coming? Why didn't I realize that's what it was, when she got forgetful, and said she drove off, and started making notes to herself?

Was I wrong to not send her some place earlier? Did I send her to the right place? Does the fact that she broke her hip in the early morning, when she was alone, mean somebody should have been there? She seemed OK until then, and was still taking care of herself, although we had taken the car keys away. She hated that, even though she didn't really go anyplace. She just used the car to go the 100 yards to the mailbox and back, especially in winter.

Yes, we had friends who looked in on her, and paid the Visiting Nurse Association to drop in three times a week to make sure she was taking her pills, because she never got that right. We had to hide the pills atop the china cabinet that is now in my apartment, because we knew all five-foot-stooped-nothing of Mom couldn't reach up there.

Should we have taken away the cat Mom was chasing when she fell? Would her mind have stayed a bit sharper, a bit longer, if she hadn't broken her hip? She left her house that October morning, never to return.

It's an insidious thing. Those strange phone calls should have told us. I wonder if we did the right thing, and I'll always wonder.

At least my wife got a taste of what Mom was like, her humor and warmth. I do wish she had been able to go to Georgia for the wedding, and at least we were able to show her the tape. But she begged off because of her arthritis, unable to deal with a large airport.

My wife and I joked that we didn't want kids, but now we had one, in her late 70s.

And we did what we could. We hustled her to the hospital, and visited her in the nursing home. But she kept fading away. At least she recognized me the last time we spoke, a couple of months before the end.

After that, nothing. We were told she was fading. On a Monday, her birthday, I took her a teddy bear. She

didn't realize anyone was there. Two days later, she was gone.

We did what she wanted for the funeral - no visitation, just a little memorial service and a lunch. My wife, with her perfect sense, picked exactly the flowers Mom loved, carnations, without even knowing. Mom's ashes, I took to Wautoma, where my youngest brother - born and dead 16 years before I showed up - and her father are buried.

I tried, Mom. And I still remember.

It's -30- For The N-C

June 3, 2005

The Green Bay News-Chronicle is printing one more obituary today - its own.

The News-Chronicle, dead at 32, survived by its sister and stepsister newspapers. Remains on view in a red coin box near you - at least for 24 hours. Private burial in the bottom of a birdcage someplace.

Such, of course, is the fate of all newspapers; it's a disposable medium. That, to those who work in them, is part of their charm. We may write something that is remembered, but there's always a deadline the next day. We may botch something royally, but like a baseball player making an error, we have a chance to do something memorable the next day to make people forget it.

There's always the next issue. Until today.

Volume 33, No. 175 marks the end of the line for a newspaper that was formed in strife and never seemed to lose that background. It was never the newspaper it could have been, but it was more than it had any right to be.

The Beginning

It started, of course, as a strike gesture.

In the early 1970s, the great issue in newspapering was the switch from traditional "hot metal" typesetting to

computerized phototypesetting. That meant fewer jobs - skilled ones - and unions fought back. There were strikes around the country.

In Green Bay, the strike by the local of the International Typographical Union in 1972 was typical. There were 42 workers out on strike. In an attempt to bring in some money and promote their cause, they started a newspaper.

Strike newspapers are nothing new. In Madison, the "Press Connection" operated during a strike against Madison Newspapers Inc. and was well-received. But most die quickly, either because the strike ends or the money runs out.

And the only other attempt to start a new newspaper in Wisconsin in recent years, "The Paper" in Oshkosh, had failed despite good quality and the Miles Kimball money behind it.

But the Green Bay union gave it a try. On Nov. 13, 1972, The Daily News made its appearance. Like the Press-Gazette, it was a broadsheet, appeared in the afternoons, and was heavy on wire copy (United Press International) with features the P-G hadn't purchased (Dear Abby was there, then as now, as was the original Heloise).

The strikers had rounded up "anyone who could hold a pen," as one early reporter put it. Christian Heide was the first editor. He left quickly, and others followed.

Tom Brooker, editor in 1976-77 and again today, said he couldn't remember how many had come before him, but there were at least five. (The current count is 10 or 11, depending on whether, like Grover Cleveland, you count Brooker twice.)

The paper started at a small building on Thrush Street, but added an office on Broadway in time for the first issue. There was no press; the paper was printed at the Shawano Leader for the first year before being moved in October 1973 to the presses of Brown County Publishing in Denmark. With the move, the Daily News switched to morning publication.

Nobody had really expected the paper to continue for that long. One reason it stayed alive was the support of one of the area's richest men, Victor McCormick. A couple of indications of his clout in Green Bay: it was his name that graced the old Vic Theater (now the Meyer) and space was found in his Minahan-McCormick building for the paper's offices.

His biggest contribution, one year after the paper started, was buying 80 percent of the stock of the newspaper and buying a press in 1975, allowing the Daily News to be printed in Green Bay (at the old Vocational School, now the Green Bay School District headquarters).

Why? Nobody really knew. One report said he was angry at the Press-Gazette for unflattering reporting of his personal life, even though he had ties to the Minahan

family ownership of the paper at that time. He would provide the Daily News with a slogan for its editorial page for many years: "Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way."

McCormick stayed active until 1976, when he was hospitalized with a heart attack and his family sold his interest.

The Wood Era Begins

But along with the continuing losses were coming new problems. The Press-Gazette was suing because the Daily News had won the contract to print official city notices. Then, the Daily News started a free shopper, taking on the Brown County Chronicle of Brown County Publishing and Frank A. Wood. The costs were higher than the Daily News expected, and even McCormick wasn't ready to subsidize that much. Wood, meanwhile, was still owed money for the Daily News' use of its presses, and was considering his own lawsuit. The solution was a settlement. Wood and BCP bought 45 percent of the stock in Metropolitan Newspaper Corp., with Minahan holding 45 percent and the original stockholders the rest.

It didn't sit well with some of the original staff, who felt having to sell the paper had shown they had lost their battle. Wood, for his part, took a leave of absence from his teaching duties at St. Norbert College and worked late into the night to keep his new paper going.

The takeover brought two major changes. Wood folded his Chronicle shopper into the daily, renaming the paper the News-Chronicle. (Also coming along in the deal was the artwork of a former WBAY-TV staffer who did cartoons for the Chronicle: Lyle Lahey.)

And the paper switched to tabloid size, unusual outside of big cities but easier to handle. For many readers, it was - and remained to the end - a big selling point.

Wood moved printing back to Denmark. He also started to grow a beard, saying he would not shave until the paper turned a break-even month. It took 21 months and a 13-inch beard that Santa would envy before there was a profit of \$125.81, in November 1977.

Another change came in 1982, when the News-Chronicle moved into what would become its trademark building, a former convent at 133 S. Monroe St. However, the printing (and copy desks) were kept in Denmark until the paper's last year.

The losses continued, but seemed to be diminishing as the newspaper got a foothold. The paper's peers were noticing; the News-Chronicle started to win awards in the Wisconsin Newspaper Association's annual contest for the quality of its writing and photography.

And it showed on the bottom line. There were small profits in 1984 and 1985. An article in Editor and Publisher, the national newspaper trade magazine, in 1986

noted the newspaper's new profitability and its willingness to take different stances.

Happy Cats, Scowling Ducks

The News-Chronicle seemed to have established itself as part of Green Bay. It had cleared niches; coverage of local government, high school sports, even bowling.

It even had its own mascot, a Lahey-drawn cat who appeared in house advertising and on forms.

But one thing the paper didn't have was a large staff, and that sometimes caused problems. Stories that needed a second reading sometimes barely got a first.

The ultimate came in the late 1970s, shortly after the paper got new computers. A sportswriter had rewritten a press release about a meeting of the waterfowl preservation group Ducks Unlimited. While practicing on the new equipment, he typed in a paragraph as a joke for the editor who would read it.

If you can find a News-Chronicle staffer, he or she can tell you the paragraph. Suffice to say it suggested the group's only accomplishment had been "messing up the landscape" with "a lot of (adjective deleted) duck (leavings)."

Instead of "delete," he hit "send."

Brooker said he got a call from Wood the next morning, and the publisher ordered his editor to read the

story. Aloud. "And all they've accomplished is to mess up the ... oh, sweet mother of God!" Brooker said.

"Exactly," Wood replied.

To this day, the issue remains the only one ever to sell completely out. By 9 a.m.

The folks at Ducks Unlimited, bless them, were able to laugh. The writer got a week's suspension (would have been longer, but he was needed), and the paper managed to make duck salad out of duck leavings.

Lahey, never missing a trick, had his cartoon ready: a duck, in hip boots and a scowl, picketing the building which carried the motto: "The News-Chronicle: The Friend of the Duck."

Which the folks at Ducks Unlimited commissioned for table centerpieces at their next dinner.

There would be others.

A headline: "Homicide suspect napped here."

A thief being arraigned at St. Francis Xavier Cathedral.

The occasional wrong team winning in a headline.

None, of course, were funny at the time. Well, maybe the one about the duck.

Always There

The News-Chronicle would miss only one day of publication in its history. That took place with the issue of Nov. 2, 1985, better known in Green Bay as the day after the "Snow Bowl" game between the Packers and Tampa Bay. An 18-inch windblown snowfall not only kept game attendance down, it eventually closed Interstate 43 and County R, keeping staff members from getting to Denmark to print the paper.

On some other occasions, deliveries were delayed by power failures or weather, but there was a paper printed.

The latest would come in the next-to-last week of the N-C's existence, when a cable between Green Bay and the Gannett presses in Appleton was accidentally cut, hampering both the News-Chronicle and Press-Gazette.

Attack of the Big Boys

The story broke in The News-Chronicle in early 1980: an outside entity was interested in the Green Bay Press-Gazette. Enterprising reporters were on hand at Austin Straubel International Airport to greet representatives of the Gannett newspaper group when they flew to Green Bay. Soon, it was confirmed: Gannett would buy the P-G and its sister paper, the Wausau Record Herald.

The atmosphere had changed. Instead of fighting another locally owned newspaper, the News-Chronicle's

competition had deep, deep pockets. And they weren't afraid to dip into them, keeping staffing levels high and ad prices low. While the News-Chronicle had been profitable in the mid-1980s, the status soon changed. And Wood thought his competition wasn't playing fair.

So in 1988, he called a friend, Richard McCord, who had exposed unsavory practices by Gannett aimed against other newspapers. McCord, reluctantly, came to Green Bay.

He worked quietly, with no hint to staff members below the top levels of what he was doing. In his book, "The Chain Gang," McCord would spend a lot of time describing his loneliness as the hired-gun reporter.

But his report would be a shocker. Prior to Nov. 27, 1989, ads trumpeted, "this newspaper will make the biggest announcement in its history."

It was the first of a 10-part series, "It's Now or Never," that detailed the operations of the News-Chronicle and attacks against it by Gannett. Photos showed the staff, arms folded in determination. The title phrase ran as a banner across the bottom of the front page for almost a year.

It worked - for a while. But it worked too well. The undersized circulation staff couldn't keep up with demand, and many of the subscriptions sold were not renewed for poor delivery.

Still, it had bought time. The paper went into the 1990s under editor Ron Poppenhagen as a consistent award winner and solid second voice.

The Shoppers

As noted, "shoppers" - the free papers that generally consist of nothing but advertising - have played a key role in keeping the N-C alive. They've gone under various names, but usually had one thing in common - they gave a little extra value.

In the late 1980s, the News-Chronicle even turned a shopper into its first "Sunday" paper. "News-Chronicle Sunday" actually came out on Saturdays, and included breaking news and sports that had been part of the Saturday daily (which was a serious money-loser). The name was eventually switched to "Weekend Edition," then back to the "Brown County Chronicle."

They carried a variety of unusual copy, including food tips from a well-known area chef, Andy Mueller, and an outdoors column by author Mitch Bent that often avoided the "my day of hunting/fishing" style for looks at the politics of conservation.

In recent years, the shoppers were given new identities as the "Community News" and "Journal Shopper" in De Pere. Those publications were transformed in May into the "Community Snapshots" publication distributed by the Press-Gazette.

The 1990s: A New Look

In 1992, the paper marked its 20th anniversary with a large special section saluting the past and looking forward to the future. The annual sections ran until last year, often with special themes. (In 2002, for the 30th anniversary, "30 people who care" were profiled.)

In the early 1990s, the paper changed its design several times, with new headline styles, a switch putting sports on the back page, and new nameplates.

By 1995, the presses in Denmark had been upgraded, and color photography on the front became a regular feature. The biggest change came in 1997, when Wood pledged new support for the paper. A major redesign added daily color to the front. New local columnists from the community gave the editorial page a new zing. The staff was at its largest in years. The paper was promoting itself more. A trade-off with WLUK-TV brought its meteorologist, John Chandik, to the printed page. New sections were added, from real estate to employment.

Old sections were dressed up. The entertainment section, which had gone by such names as "TGIF," "Bay Beat" and "Friday to Friday," was relaunched as the colorful "Rave!"

And the paper added a new outlet: the Internet. Opened in 1996, greenbaynewschron.com became an

immediate hit, due in part to fortuitous timing. That year, the Green Bay Packers made their first trip to the Super Bowl in 30 years, and what had been planned as a weekly update quickly turned daily, to the joy of online football fans.

The Web site was the first for a Green Bay newspaper, and was often competitive with those covering the Packers in other cities. Gradually, it became a full-service site with a variety of features on health, employment and other areas.

In 1997, the paper finally dropped United Press International, which was fading into oblivion, for the Associated Press wire. The N-C had carried the New York Times service for many years; it added the Los Angeles Times-Washington Post wire and the Christian Science Monitor news service. And in November 1998, the paper spent \$180,000 on new editorial equipment, its first in 10 years.

But several outside forces conspired to end the hopes for a resurgence. The price of newsprint, the paper newspapers are printed on, skyrocketed. Staff members left and were not replaced.

Some Historic Issues

The News-Chronicle has printed three "extras" in its 32 years. All came after the year 2000.

The first came on a date seared into the national memory: Sept. 11, 2001. Staff members were quickly sent out to get local reaction and find out what was being done against this sudden threat. Copy editors grabbed everything they could off the wire. By 3:30 p.m., a section, with the headline "Day Of Terror," was being sold on the streets of Green Bay; it would be included in the next day's regular paper (which had even more coverage).

The third helped the News-Chronicle avoid a problem it had in 2000. On that election night, like many other broadcast and print outlets, the N-C struggled to keep up with the changing returns in the Al Gore-George W. Bush presidential race. Finally, at about 2 a.m., Florida seemed to have gone to the Republicans, and the front page with the big headline "IT'S BUSH" went to the press.

By the time everyone got home, the headline was, as a former presidential press secretary used to say, "inoperative." It wasn't until weeks later that the N-C and everybody else learned that yes, it was Bush.

In 2004, under new management, the press time was less flexible, and the N-C had to go with a headline showing the race was undecided. But this time, a second edition was printed in early afternoon showing that, indeed, the president had kept his job. (It also provided more complete totals on statewide and local races.)

The third extra came on July 23, 2004, and is part of the final chapter.

Enter Sundays

It was clear that something would have to happen. Soon after the events of 9-11, the economy, already in a slump, was getting worse. Healthy newspapers were cutting back. The News-Chronicle was not healthy.

More to the point, the paper was losing its lifeline. Brown County Publishing had been able to keep the NC going with transfusions from its other areas, notably commercial printing. But that market had changed. It was barely profitable, and many of the long-time customers BCP had cultivated with fast turnarounds, quality effort and a "do everything we can" attitude were going solely on price.

In addition, the consolidation of businesses into larger businesses, and the continuing growth of franchises and chain stores were eating at both commercial printing and newspapers. Why should a Wal-Mart advertise in every newspaper when all it had to do was keep telling consumers on television that it had the lowest prices?

And as the smaller of the two dailies, the News-Chronicle was an extra buy. It couldn't offer group sales to big regional and national chains. Car dealers found it useful, and the Oneida Casino was a regular on the entertainment pages. But fewer and fewer others followed.

Attempts were made to stem the tide. In 2002, the News-Chronicle struck a deal with the Milwaukee Journal

Sentinel. The N-C would start a Sunday edition. It would be available as part of the Sunday Journal Sentinel.

The move boosted circulation, despite complaints from some subscribers that they did not want to pay more for the Milwaukee paper. Eventually, the Journal Sentinel cut back its circulation in Northeast Wisconsin, and the Sunday N-C became as much of a stand-alone paper as an insert in the larger edition.

In addition, a new publication was started. "This Week" was to be an insert in all BCP paid publications, from Sturgeon Bay to Denmark, handled by the News-Chronicle but pulling stories from all of them.

But with the cutbacks, things got worse in the newsroom. The news staff was down to 10, including two copy editors, a photographer, features editor, news editor, reporter, two sports reporters, weekend photographer/clerical person and another clerical person. And that was all.

It was clear that something had to be done, or the News-Chronicle was going to go, and maybe take all of Brown County Publishing with it.

Some people thought the Sunday deal might lead the Journal Sentinel to buy the News-Chronicle. That wasn't to happen.

The Purchase

What did happen was, as one observer suggested, the Green Bay equivalent of President Bush hiring Osama bin Laden for a Cabinet post.

In late July, staff members at all Brown County Publishing sites were told to report to Green Bay for a 9:30 a.m. meeting at the Holiday Inn City Centre. Rumors were flying. Not even Brooker, an officer of the company, knew what was going on until 36 hours before the announcement.

Crowded into a ballroom, they saw an emotional Frank Wood and an unknown woman enter.

Wood, in his typical style, was blunt. "I've sold the whole works to Gannett," he said. There was nervous laughter. "I'm not joking," he emphasized, to a gasp - and maybe a few boos.

Gradually, the woman - Gannett's Ellen Leifeld, publisher of the Appleton Post-Crescent - and Wood answered the questions. Everybody still had a job. All papers were still operating, including the N-C. No pay change, no title change. They were now on new insurance, but that would be worked out.

And the News-Chronicle staff went back to work to put out its extra - the first paper since 1974 not under the direction of Frank Wood.

Wood had realized the problems with the company would leave major issues for his heirs to sort out

should he die. And in Leifeld, he had found something he probably thought he never would - a Gannett person who was willing to keep his newsprint children alive.

The Final Months

A casual observer would have seen few changes a month after Gannett took over The News-Chronicle. The staff was the same; in fact, an extra copy editor was about to be hired to help meet new deadlines. The printing was about to be moved to Gannett's state-of-the-art Appleton facility, and there would be more color throughout.

But some of the people were starting to leave. Distribution was now being handled by the Press-Gazette. The deadline was moved up on Saturday nights because of so many Sunday papers being printed for other publications.

Gannett concentrated on the business end of the acquisition, and left the News-Chronicle news and editorial staffs alone to cover the busy election year and its aftermath.

But it was clear advertising was getting thinner. The paper's deficits were not shrinking, but growing. And in early May, the decision was made. The blood had almost run out.

The announcement - nowhere near the surprise of the previous year's sale - was made in the News-Chronicle's conference room on May 26. All but six of the

35 or so staff members left were offered jobs at nearby Gannett publications.

Some staff members - mostly in advertising - would leave the next day. A few would stay to put out the final week's papers. And on June 3 - today - they would put out one last Green Bay News-Chronicle.

Can a Morning Paper Ride Into the Sunset?

June 3, 2005

For obvious reasons, this one's going to be a little personal. I would have just stepped aside and let my cat Trip write the final one, but he would have been, well, catty.

And now is not the time for that.

It is, however, the time to thank everyone who has e-mailed, written, sent Biblical tracts, left a message on my voice mail, or snarled at me on the street. All I could ever hope for was to be read; the rest was always up to you, and your responses, even when foul, were always appreciated.

And many of them weren't. I've had some very personal thoughts in this space, about parents leaving, my own background and life in general. I figured I'd let Maureen Dowd and William Safire chew on the heavy stuff.

So you got the latest comments from my wise wife, a batch of one-liners in weeks when I didn't have two thoughts to string together, and the occasional wild fling (I don't think that McCain-Feingold presidential ticket is going to work out).

And many of you were kind enough to respond, to mention that you went through the same things, and

that you cared. And that moved me more than you can ever know.

Even those of you who told me to get stuffed were appreciated. Sometimes a writer needs to hear that, too. I've never believed in omnipotence.

I leave a firm believer in compromise, the idea that none of us is as smart as all of us, and the idea that nobody is right all the time, including the left. And I leave knowing that not all stories have a happy ending.

We knew what is happening today was inevitable; it just made no economic sense to keep us around. At least the blow was cushioned for some of us; I only wish it could have been for a few more.

And having worked under Frank Wood's roof for the bulk of that time, I must tip my cap in his direction once more for doing all he could until the end to keep us going.

A year ago, when times were bleak, I was thinking how I'd end my final column here, and was tempted to use a line former New York mayor Ed Koch used after losing an election: "The people have spoken, and now they must be punished."

Can't really say that. We gave it the best we could, which is all anyone can do, and we realized that that isn't always enough.

And we probably got more support from you readers than we deserved. We weren't always able to put out the best possible product. But we did our darndest with what we had.

No bitterness as we shut the doors, then. I just look down at the cat who has shared the last few months of columns - figuring he's something of an expert, having nine lives - and say "come along, Trip; let's see what the next life holds for both of us."