

A bald eagle is captured in flight, its wings spread wide, flying over a body of water. The water is a deep blue with some ripples. In the background, there is a sandy or muddy bank with a layer of snow or ice. Behind the bank, there is a dense thicket of dry, brown reeds or grasses. The entire scene is framed within a rounded rectangle with a dark blue border.

Peace on Earth!

*Pen in Hand
Boscobel Dial*

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Vintage Postcard 1912

Season's Greetings

2012 has been a year for writing.

November 2011 my long time writing group, *Pen in Hand* began a weekly column for the *Boscobel Dial*. With three of us, each has to come up with something every three weeks. I just emailed my 23rd column. Readers picked these as their favorites.

In December, the 125th of my monthly historical pieces for the *Prairie du Chien Courier-Press* will appear. Surprisingly it's easier to find historic topics. I try to avoid politics, religion, and other hot topics for the *Dial*. Being a swing voter in a swing district in a swing state, I had plenty to say, but I restrained myself.

And to my amazement, I have just completed my 4th Volume and 40th story in my *Send a Story of Prairie du Chien* Series. www.prairieduchienstories.com tells about that.

On to Volume V 2013. I plan to go digital. Wish me luck.

May you enjoy good health and countless blessings in 2013.

Full Disclosure

12 January 2012

In the interest of full disclosure, I rarely have a *Pen in Hand*. The keyboard and mouse render my thoughts into digital bytes. After columns leave my head, they live in the hard drive until they are sent to *The Dial* by email. During the process, no hand was anywhere near a pen.

We have come a long way since the quill pen and inkpot, not that I remember those days—senior though I am. I do remember a few other technologies that seemed wonderful at the time. Remember learning to write cursive with a fountain pen that had a tiny bladder to be filled from a Scrip ink bottle? It was messy. Then the wonder of ballpoint pens! At first, they were too expensive, for a kid to use and lose in school. Eventually, school desks were made without holes in their upper corners.

I never loved a machine as much as my electric blue *IBM Selectric*; truth be told, I haven't owned any of the addictive *Imachines—Pods or Pads*. With the wonder machine, you backed up, fixed the typo and moved forward. I got the Selectric to do my 150 page master's thesis; it had to be errorless—absolutely no corrections. A good typist charged \$3 or \$4 a page. Instead of hiring a professional, I invested the money in the machine. As it turned out, it wasn't such a bright idea. It took me all summer to type the paper. One page with tricky footnotes took 17 times.

I resisted replacing the *Selectric* with a computer. Finally, I caved, but my thoughts would not flow on the computer. I had to compose long hand and use the computer as a typewriter. When I figured out how to edit by cutting and pasting, without scissors, I was sold. Before long, so was the *Selectric*. These days if I want my thoughts to form, I head to a keyboard. Strange how our technologies change the way we do things. Aging bodies also encourage some shifts. My once readable handwriting is cramped just like the hand that creates it.

Storage on the computer is so easy. Unlike humans, the computer almost never loses a file — unless the hard drive crashes. Even then, computer geniuses can often recover the lost data. We have back up drives, and back up for our back up. Redundancy used to be a fatal flaw in writing, but in the computer world, it's a game changer.

I love my computer and almost never write anything by hand. Schools have stopped teaching cursive, handwriting is so passé. What is the world coming to?

I hope it is coming to voice activation—and soon. I would like the keyboard and mouse to go the way of the inkpots and pens.

Psycho Dog's Lesson

26 January 2012

Ginger Joy is the anxiety ridden Pomeranian that shares my life. I refer to her as my psycho dog, but I talk a good game. Although she is 6 or 7, she has been with me only 2 years. One day as I was walking along, she came out of nowhere, jumped into my arms and hung on. I take credit for rescuing her, but clearly, the idea was hers. Since her leap of faith, she does not leave my side if she can help it. I discovered she had many problems, but that is another story— an amazing one.

Although she is a sweet lap dog and great companion, she is ever on high alert. She barks at people walking down her street, shadows on the floor and the wind in the trees. Not at all a slow learner, one time for her becomes a routine. That is what happened with the ride in the car and the walk in the park. When I pick up my car keys, she goes into a frenzy of circling and barking. It's just easier to take her and get it over with.

Recently, we were out enjoying the Indian summer. It was so balmy; I cracked the passenger side window. She hurried across the front seat and poked her nose out followed by her neck. She has the habit of jumping on the buttons and opening the windows. It would be just like psycho dog to get her neck caught I thought. When she moved away from the window, I turned to the controls to close it. The window didn't shut all the way. Imagine my surprise when I looked over and saw her dangling, back feet flailing just short of touching the seat. She couldn't bark her alarm; her fox like nose was clamped shut by the window.

I claim that I am ready to be dogless. Be careful what you ask for! For an awful minute when I saw her hanging by her nose,



I feared I was about to get my wish. I released the window and hoped. She rushed over and buried her head in my lap—didn't even whimper. I checked her face—didn't flinch at all. When we got home, she expected a treat, so I knew she was fine. If she ever refuses food, I'll take her straight to the vet. These days, she doesn't go near the window. Ginger Joy learned to be careful where she sticks her nose—a lesson we humans could take to heart.

Confessions of a Lukewarm Fan

9 February 2012

How can one decide? Spend \$250 on a Packer's share that would lose all but sentimental value as soon as you bought it, or invest in an authentic—just like the players wear—jersey for that \$250?

My brother suggested that one would want to be a more loyal fan than I am for such an outlay. He has been a diehard Viking fan forever, but I have never seen him wearing the purple. He reminded me that he has to call me at the beginning of the season to see who I am supporting. He claims I keep my clothes longer than I do my allegiance to a team. Usually I like the Packer's but I have been an Eagle's fan when they are winning. One year I was partial to the Lions. I can't remember why; surely, it wasn't because they were winning. I used to like the Giants, but not right now. In truth, I want anyone but the Vikings to win. That has more to do with the phone calls I can make to my brothers asking about the game when the Vikings lose. "How about that Vikings game?" How sweet it is! As you can imagine, I got payback calls after that Packer-Giant debacle. "How about those Packers?" The worm always turns!

My idea of a good game was the 5th grade girls' basketball match up I watched last week. The Prairie Catholic Saints beat the Wauzeka Hornets by a few points in a low scoring affair. In this case, every girl out there was a winner. It has to be overwhelming, first learning the game—just holding on to the ball and moving it down the court, knowing where you are supposed to be, knowing the rules of the game, playing before the people that matter most. A fast-paced game, it was not, what with the regular turnovers and frequent traveling. At this level, they miss more shots than they hit, but when they make one, it is sweet—especially if that basket seals the victory. On both sides, they were part of a team, and they were enjoying it. Is there a more important life lesson than knowing how to contribute your unique talents to a team?

The other clear winners were their coaches. Wauzeka had two men—dads don't you think? The Saints were led by two women—likely moms. They were patient, positive and stressing fundamentals. Nothing here that would give coaches a bad rep. Although these girls have not played much ball, they did really well. One doesn't have to be an expert to see there was some fine coaching going on.

And the parents were doing their part, dads selling tickets and moms making and selling pizzas to support the teams. They wore their royal blue allegiance in long sleeved T-shirts with big red Saints emblazoned on the front. There is a jersey I would buy and wear, and it wouldn't cost any \$250.

Driftless Circle

1 March 2012

A friend returned from China full of excitement after the trip of a lifetime. While I am happy for her and want to hear all about her adventures, I am not envious.

I taught overseas for four years long ago; that experience was life changing better than an advanced college degree. Now I am not interested in travel that requires a plane ride or living out of a suitcase. I have voluntarily grounded myself here in the Driftless Area. I had no idea it was driftless when I moved here nearly 42 years ago.

"You're going to a river town?" friends asked in a tone that suggested I had lost my mind. I planned to stay a year or two until I could find a job in a *better* place. Early on, I lost my heart to this old river town, its people, its scenery, its history—for me there is no *better* place. Still one does want to get out of Dodge now and then.

I've borrowed the plan of a saavy traveler I heard about although I don't know his name and haven't found his book. He took out his map and drew a circle around his hometown and began an ongoing adventure of exploring his surroundings. His radius was 100 miles; mine is smaller, 60 miles or an hour's drive. Why didn't I think of that?

My driftless circle starts in Prairie du Chien heads south to Dubuque, arcs east to Dodgeville north to La Crosse and comes full circle in Decorah to the West. The itinerary touches four states from the Old Northwest—Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota. It is a perfect setting for day trips and the occasional overnighter. And I rarely have to sleep in a bed not my own.

My Canon Rebel is always on the seat beside me. I am ever looking for a vista to practice with my panoramic lens. I will argue that Pike's Peak in McGregor has the best view along the Upper Mississippi, but Wyalusing Park's and Mount Hosmer's in Lansing are terrific. Effigy Mounds is just sublime and worth the climb. I hear that the Rush Creek Overlook is spectacular but its steep trail is the wild haunt of snakes, so it is still on the bucket list. The recently installed wildlife viewing station south of Brownsville, Minnesota is a favorite destination when the pelicans stop in the spring or the geese around Thanksgiving. I never tire of watching the pelicans lumber into the air or come skidding to a stop; not the picture of grace and beauty as is the Canadian goose.

As for coming attractions, I haven't made the world class Westby Ski jump; 2012 might be the year except it would be hard to avoid a crowd—not my favorite thing.

The Winter of Many Eagles

8 March 2012

I stood along St. Feriole Slough the other morning with my camera poised. I was watching the convention of eagles gathered in the trees lining the water. I had the same urge to count that I get when I am stuck waiting for a long train to pass. Before my attention wandered, I once counted 137 cars; but I digress. I counted 42 eagles before they went into a flying pattern and rearranged themselves and I lost my place in the count. A friend said she and her husband counted 58 that day. Obviously, others are obsessed with counting.

The eagles were swooping and looping, and I was shooting as fast as the camera could. The chance of getting a good shot of a flying eagle without a tripod is about as good as winning the multi-million dollar lottery. Yet we keep trying; sometimes we get lucky and get a respectable photo.

Three other women with cameras gathered with me on the bridge over the slough. Although we didn't know each other, before long we were chatting. Something about the wonder of the eagles has to be shared. We reviewed the shots we got yesterday, talked about the zoom power of small cameras and got advice about where to get the best buy— which was not Best Buys. We did not remember seeing that many eagles in one place for a long time. Did anyone know whether the Decorah Eagle had laid more eggs? She only had one, but the world was expecting more any day. One woman said her grade school age children eagerly check the Decorah Eagle Cam every day in their classroom. She said Decorah

Cam got so many donations last year that they were able to update their outmoded equipment.

That morning the snowfall of the night before hung in the trees. Heavy, wet snow weighed down the branches — perfect snowman, snowball fight snow. The scene before us looked like a Christmas card. We enthused about the beauty all around us until my old feet got cold in the slush. I went in search of my first cup of morning coffee.

With so much evidence that the world is going to hell in a hand basket, it was heartening to see something going so well. Some of us have been around long enough to remember when seeing a pair of eagles would have been rare. In 1967, the bald eagle was placed on the endangered species list. Forty years later in 2007, they were removed, a reversal that almost never happens with threatened species. We got something right! The government, the wildlife management teams, the people — somebody got it right. As I turned around for one last look at the eagles, I said a quick prayer that we would be smart enough to realize what we have regained and protect the eagles and their habitat for those who will follow us, that they too will occasionally enjoy an easy winter in Wisconsin with no snow and many eagles. [See the cover photo.]

Keyed Up

19 April 2012

Have you noticed that the interval between those pesky senior moments is getting much shorter than it used to be? I experienced a doozy the other day; the only upside is that I have something to write about.

I ran downtown to do a few errands, parked, locked my purse in the car, went in the store and quickly completed the first thing on my list. Half way across the street, I clicked to unlock the door. When I opened it, I was alarmed to see that my purse was gone. I couldn't believe it. I am so paranoid about locking the car, and I wasn't gone 5 minutes. I returned and asked my friend to call the police.

Back outside I began to think. Why would anyone steal my notes or my well-used exercise shoes or the grungy rug the dog uses when we go for a ride? It was only then that I noticed another tan Impala parked right in front. I checked inside the twin car, and there was my stuff—purse, notes, shoes and rug. Fortunately, my friend reached the police before they made an unnecessary trip. Since my key had opened the other car, I locked it again and

was on my way, taking my purse with me on each of the remaining errands.

The next morning I was telling the gang what happened. One of the guys told us about his friend, John, who lost his car at church. John knew exactly where he parked his car, but it wasn't there or anywhere. A car can't just drive away. He tried to set off the horn to locate it but no luck there either. His only recourse was to call the police. Somehow, they concluded correctly that another person must have taken his car. Joe with an identical car unlocked John's vehicle, started it up, drove it home and parked it in his garage. Imagine how surprised Joe was when the police arrived at his door and asked him if by any chance he had the wrong car. The churchgoers reclaimed their rightful cars and shared a good laugh. The officer said while it doesn't happen every day, it isn't uncommon for keys to open and operate other cars. Great! Now, I have to worry about someone taking my car, instead of just my purse.

Another person had a key story. Seems his sister went shopping and lost her keys after she got home. They had to be somewhere in the house or between the car and the house. She and her better half looked high and low. Finally, they gave up and ordered new keys. On the day she picked up the replacements, she was fixing meatloaf for supper. She found her keys in the freezer under a package of hamburger. My friend doubts this was a senior moment. He says his sister has been having them as long as he has can remember. Lucky from him, he still can remember.

Politically Incorrect

10 May 12012

How did the dandelion get to be so politically incorrect? Look up close and tell me it isn't beautiful. One of nature's small treasures, it sports perfect and intricate symmetry in every bloom. It's yellow is warmth and vibrance itself. If we valued it for its merits, it would enjoy a better image. Of course, in this crazy time, image is everything.

I still catch my breath when I see the first field of green laced with dandelions— an exuberance of sunshine after winter's gray. Don't tell anyone, but I am not especially bothered if the green field is a lawn, even my lawn. You have to be amused at people who spend a young fortune keeping every last dandelion out. What do they do to the soil and the air with all their irradiation chemicals? No wonder everybody has allergies and a growing majority of our children have asthma.

As youngsters, we were shown how to put a dandelion under our chins to see if its yellow was reflected there. If so, we liked butter. Naturally, we all were guilty. But then, in those days butter was a good thing, not politically incorrect with its own image problems. Do we have something against yellow?

I liked to lie among the dandelions and study the clouds in the blue sky of late spring. If the month had an *R* in it, I reclined in secret. Mothers all warned that the ground was too cold and damp before May.

I recently heard of a gentleman now in his 80s who took his girl to the prom and offered her a bouquet of dandelions before he came up with a single, white orchid for her purple, satin gown. It worked for him; they had five children, and 44 years together.

Almost every mother remembers a fistful of dandelions from her child, the most sincere and thoughtful of tributes she will every get. Children understand instinctively that dandelions and mothers belong together because they are both so beautiful.

And abundant. You never have to run out of dandelions. I don't want to and am seriously rooting for the dandelion to keep outwitting all the chemicals and their purveyors.



The dandelion used to be valued as a spring tonic, an aid to clearing the system of its winter sludge. The leaves were a seasonal treat cooked as greens or as a salad. What vintages were coaxed from that spring flower! I knew a guy whose dandelion wine was the smoothest glass I ever tried.

I like the dandelion's enthusiasm, it doesn't contain itself but erupts when conditions are right. The Facebook viral spreads must have been inspired by it. I respect it for its endurance. We haven't killed it but not for lack of effort. When its time is over, it goes to seed so well—one fragile puff ball inviting the wind, insuring the next generation.

What's not to like? Don't expect me to understand; I don't get political correctness in any of its outbreaks.

Remembering

31 May 2012

Recently, I have been rereading Ben Logan's *The Land Remembers: the Story of a Farm and Its People*. He explained the title of his classic in words approaching poetry. "Once you have lived on the land, been a partner with its moods, secrets and seasons, you cannot leave. The living land remembers, touching you in unguarded moments."

I grew up on a Minnesota ridge farm not so different from the Logan land near Seneca. *The Land Remembers* evokes a happy feeling of home for me. I wish I could write like that, capture a wonderful way of life and a moment in time so perfectly.

My life has been blessed by four brothers and a sister. My oldest brother, George, was a dairy farmer most of his life. Recently he gave up milking and sold the cows but still worked the land. It seems to me that dairy farmers favor either the cows or the land. I think George was more of a land man. Two days after Easter, he went out in the evening to check a field and had a massive heart attack there. We feel a certain comfort in knowing that he left this earth so close to the land he had tended for so long.

The living land will remember his stewardship for years to come. Over time, he gradually built up his farm so that it produced bumper crops most seasons. He was in it for the long haul. He took a lot out of the land, but was careful to replenish it with good fertilizer and strip crop rotation—nothing fancy, just good basic side hill farming. I can't remember a crop failure. He had good years and less good years, but he was prepared for both. He didn't brag or complain about what the land gave him. "I had a pretty fair year," or he might say, "I have had better years."



His neighbors were usually in the field before he was *each* spring. The land taught him patience; he planted when the land was ready and didn't worry about what others were doing. "I am not in any hurry," he would say. By the end of the season, his crops had caught up with and often surpassed those that had a two-week head start. His land had a respectful, hardworking partner.

He was also a good big brother. The world knows that siblings have their squabbles; I am sure we had our share growing up, but I cannot recall ever having a disagreement with him or being mad at him. He didn't seek the spotlight; he left that to the rest of us. He was just quietly present. As a young girl, I felt safer

when he was around. Although our youth faded, that feeling never did.

He didn't offer advice unsought, but if I asked him something, he was so clear headed and practical. I would wonder later, "Why didn't I think of that?" He was down to earth and well grounded. Maybe his long association with the land made him that way, or perhaps he sought the land because that is how he was. Clearly, he was at home on the land and didn't venture too far from it— not physically or emotionally.

In those unguarded moments when I drive by an alfalfa field in bloom or see rows of corn thriving under the summer sun, I will remember the land and think of my brother.

Tempted

21 June 2012

There's a pretty good chance if I had a gun, I would have shot the TV the other day. Of course, if I were anywhere near a gun, I would be in danger rather than the TV. My 30-year-old Zenith probably wishes I would take it out of its misery anyway.

I am more annoyed than I have words to express by all the political ads. Wouldn't it be great if candidates would spare us their lying ads and spend the billions to pay off the national debt? That would make sense, and what would be in it for them to do something good for us?

As onerous as the political season is, it is not what tempted me to do violence to the TV. It was the news. As a friend said, "I could go the rest of my life and never know that." She grew up in Chicago, so ordinary violence doesn't faze her. I tell her she has developed immunity. Not this time.

The story that put her over the top was about the Florida man who was shot while eating the face of another man. The officer commanded him to stop, but he growled and kept on eating. Seems he was psychotically high on bath salts and whatever else. I plead hopelessly old fashioned, but aren't those minerals meant for long relaxing soaks?

A young California couple lured another young woman offering her pancakes. They fed her and killed her just for the fun of it. Then they took her car and computer, sold them and went on a spending binge. Why not, she wouldn't need it anymore? Makes you wonder what they were on.

Such total disregard for the life of another is beyond my comprehension. In our throwaway society, people have also become disposal.

Just as I was examining my guilty American conscience, I heard of a Canadian story. Our Canadians neighbors are routinely accused of being the nicest people in the world. We could not find better people to share our longest border with.

One of those wonderful Canadians dismembered a body and sent parts through the mail. First, the Conservative Party got a severed hand. A couple days later, the Liberal Party got a part. Mercifully, the news story didn't mention which one. Couldn't have been good. The media doesn't usually hold back the lurid details. The Mounties believe the killer spent some time as a porn star.

I am at a loss to explain or understand this unhappy trend; however, an old computer term does come to mind— GIGO Garbage In; Garbage Out.

It can't help that we have a generation now reaching adulthood that is not entertained by anything not laced with violence. Their movies, their video games, their songs are more violent than I can deal with. We may deny it, but we are affected by what we read and watch. We are influenced by the games we play.

It's not so different from putting sewage in the river or eating a steady diet of junk food. At some point, the river or the body or the psyche will be on overload and negative consequences will follow. We have limited what we put in the river. We are becoming aware of what we put in our obese bodies. It's time to take a hard look at what the entertainment industry offers to the next generations for their amusement. GIGO.

Fibonacci and Potatoes

12 July 2012

Most mornings I ease into the day by making a cup of tea and sitting down to check my emails. Coffee is for later after exercise. Political ads are easy, just delete without reading. Makes you want to block the addresses of those "friends" who insist on sending you political missives especially in an election year. I already know that President Obama wasn't born in Hawaii and that Mitt Romney tied the family dog to the top of their station wagon while on a summer vacation years ago. A father with five young boys and a dog in the car deserves a pass; he might have put a boy or two on the roof. People have done worse. And I have begun to wonder; was Obama born at all?

I digress. Fibonacci and Potatoes is not some gourmet Italian recipe from the Food Network. Fibonacci and potatoes were the subjects of two very different emails I got on the same day.

The *You Tube* sensation *The Fingerprint of God* wasn't religious in a direct way; it was about math in general and Fibonacci numbers in particular. The numbers have been around a long time. Leonardo died at 80 years in 1250. Why was I the last person on earth to hear about them?

Fibonacci didn't discover the numbers named for him, he just explained and applied them to the world around him. If students were encouraged to play around with numbers like he did, maybe more of them would love math and become engineers. You can bet that students in India and China know all about Fibonacci.

The Fibonacci sequence has been applied to art, music, design and stock market investing. Nature abounds with examples of the Fibonacci Spirals. Pine cones, pineapples and sunflower; nautilus shells, sand dollars, and ocean waves, the human ear and fingerprints all have a variation of a Fibonacci spiral based on a set of his numbers. Supposedly, there are 6.5 billion sets of fingerprints now on earth, yet no two are alike and all are variations of a Fibonacci Spiral.

The other email was about peeling potatoes. Your cheap peeler or ever dull paring knife are no longer the way to go. The older woman who played Mary Ann on *Gilligan's Island* in the blossom of her youth narrated the video. Now she shills for Idaho Potatoes. For the perfectly peeled potato, score it once around the middle with a knife. Drop it in a pot of boiling water and cook until finished. Submerge it in ice water for few seconds until it cools down so you can handle it. Both ends of the peel should slip off leaving you with a flawless potato. Maybe I am thick headed, but I don't see the advantage of perfectly peeled potato that is going to be cubed or riced or mashed before anyone sees it. I admit, I have my peeler handy in case it's a potato day.

Spare me your political rants; otherwise, keep the emails coming. I have acquired a fresh way to look at the world of nature. There are Fibonacci Spirals everywhere with the possible exception of in the perfectly peeled boring, white, Idaho Potato.

A Shocking Premise

2 August 2012

Cooped up inside during the recent siege of hot weather, I read more than usual. One of the books I am still trying to get my hands on is Candice Millard's biography of President Garfield with a title so long it barely fits on the cover. I could get it from Amazon in no time, but I have yet to buy a thing online. Besides I

don't need another book lying around and will wait until it shows up on a public library shelf near me.

Garfield was a well-respected Ohio congressman for 17 years. He had no desire to be President and preferred to stay in congress. Maybe Lincoln's death was still fresh in his mind. During his distinctive service with an Ohio regiment, Lincoln was the Commander in Chief. Like Lincoln, Garfield was born in a log cabin.

According to Garfield's biographer, he was both scary smart and incredibly nice. I know— it's hard to believe given his line of work. Still I am not especially interested in his political career or his personality however commendable. Like most of you, all I knew was that Garfield was a president assassinated a long time ago.

I am somewhat more interested in the shooter; why are bad guys so intriguing? Charles Guiteau shot the President because he didn't get a government job he repeatedly requested. Although he was not qualified, he felt entitled to a job. The spoils system was the way to get appointments then. Many with jobs were not any more qualified though most were saner. Guiteau routinely said things that made no sense. People ignored him if they could. At his trial, he made a crazy claim, "I didn't kill the President; I just shot him." Guiteau was essentially correct; unfortunately for him, they hanged him anyway.

I, like Garfield's biographer, wanted to know what killed him if it was not the assassin's bullet as I always heard. While Millard was researching Alexander Graham Bell for another story, she found his connection to Garfield. Bell was asked to use his recently invented metal detector to find the bullet. They had tried unsuccessfully to retrieve it using an array of unsterilized probes. The doctor in charge was arrogant, ambitious, and obviously not scary smart like his patient. He would only let attendants look on the side where the bullet entered. It had lodged on the opposite side and was being encased in a protective cyst. His wound was similar to those many veterans took to their graves decades after the Civil War. Likely, Garfield would have survived the gunshot if his attendants had left the bullet alone or if they had probed with clean hands or instruments. In a nutshell, that is the shocking premise of Millard's biography.

Joseph Lister's theory that disease and infection came from germs introduced into the body was accepted in Europe but not in the United States. Here doctors believed that miasma or bad air caused disease and illness. Living along the Mississippi or

Wisconsin Rivers in July and August was inviting illness, goading the Grim Reaper.

President Garfield's case changed their minds. His death ended the debate, and the practice of sterilizing hands, instruments and environments became standard procedure soon afterwards. As we have heard, something good often comes from the worst misfortunes.

It would take another assassination before they thought of protecting the president. Garfield himself said that assassination was as likely as a lightning strike. He was not worried about either.

Sadly, he was wrong—dead wrong.

Something Darker

23 August 2012

Mass shootings have dominated the news in the last few weeks. We say the media gives the murderers too much attention, yet we sit glued to the endless reports during each unthinkable event. What could be more inconceivable than being gunned down in a movie theater on a Friday night or in a temple on Sunday morning? These things should not happen.

Each time a rampage occurs, we ask the same question. Who would do this? We ask, but we should know the answer by now. We have suffered through 28 mass shootings since that awful spring day at Columbine in 1999.

The shooters are 94 % male and 63 % white. Almost half are in their second decade of life between the age of 20 and 30. Few are fathers. Most are single or divorced and suffered a big loss shortly before they shot up some very public place. They choose soft targets— schools, theaters, churches, malls, places of work. Many have had problems with alcohol, but most do not have serious criminal or mental health histories.

The shooters are invariably loners who are attracted to guns, but many who knew them are surprised by their actions. When authorities dig into their lives, they usually find red flags, but not alarming enough to have predicted such terrible violence. Hindsight, being 20\20, makes things clearer.

We keep trying to understand mass shooters, but it's a fool's errand. As one law enforcement officer said, these shooters are motivated by some psychological reward that is known only to them. They internalize their frustrations, disappointments and injuries and let them fester until they erupt in murderous frenzy. Some event is often the tipping point that sets them off. We all have been frustrated, disappointed, injured, but we don't shoot strangers in cold blood. Something darker is at work.

Another pattern is clear; these horrors tend to come in clusters. In 1999, there were three mass shootings. The years between 2000 and 2006 were quieter with only 5 shootings in 6 years. Then another siege with 4 in 2007, 4 in 2008 and 6 in 2009. We fear that the intense media spotlight on one deranged killer and his incident sows the seeds for the next one.

While we are not surprised when breaking news announces another mass shooting, we are shocked and saddened. We wish something could be done to end these random and senseless outrages.

One blogger likens the shootings to destructive wildfires. He says it's best to prevent them. When we can't; hopefully, we can get out of the way. When neither prevention nor flight is possible, the outcome leaves us violated and speechless. Evil is like those fires that break out of control taking precious lives, leaving families and communities broken, leaving all of us diminished.

We never really know what causes the shootings or even less how to prevent them. This much we do know. There will be another shooting and another after that. Right now, a young, white male is out there somewhere nursing his wounds and legally buying guns and ammo.

Age Is In

13 September 2012

Age seems to be the “in” these days; that is good news to some of us celebrating big birthdays this year— you know the kind, a double digit with a zero at the end. Hearing about some amazing really senior people makes me feel like a kid again. My friend, also with the same *big birthday* I enjoyed, tells me, “Seventy is the new fifty.” Tell my hips that.

Mary Anne Cooper is a 96-year-old swimmer who persuaded her 70-year-old daughter to drive her from British Columbia to Arizona for a swim meet that had a category for people in their 90s. She says such contests are hard to find. Her daughter also participated. Mom won her category. No word about the daughter. The secret Mary Anne said is to notice life's little surprises that are everywhere. And she added with a smile, “Don't sit on the sidelines; dive in.”

A 100-year-old painter did hundreds of paintings all over the world. He only missed Australia and New Zealand, but painting a picture *Down Under* was on his bucket list when he passed away. He said his paintings were like photos each recorded a unique experience and together recalled his wonderful life. His rows and rows of paintings were also quite wonderful.

Recently one of the La Crosse TV stations featured a five some from Ettrick. Their combined ages was 480 some years. Two golfers were centenarians, two were in their 90s, one was in his 80s. They had recently added a substitute, a mere baby at 70. They golf once a week then retire to the clubhouse to roll some dice and have a beer. They always play nine holes and on many outings add another nine. They say it is as much about friendship as it is about golf.

83-year-old Andy McGuffin beats all comers in free throw contests. He has nothing flashy to say about his success. It comes from concentration and repetition. Staying active is the key to a happy old age. He says he'll be ready when he gets old. His grandsons and great grandsons want to beat him a free throw contest—just once.

In 1912, the average life expectancy for men was 51 years; for women, 55. Clearly, we are living longer. According to a recent projection, the number of centenarians in the United States is expected to double in the next few decades.

A study comparing the life spans of Seven Day Adventists with the general population shows they live longer—for men, 7 years longer than men in the general population; for women, a 4-1\2 year advantage. The big difference was their plant-based diet. Other factors that improve longevity are keeping body weight stable neither too heavy nor too light and eating a handful of nuts 4 or 5 days a week. It helps to have regular vigorous exercise and to never have smoked. We have heard that all before. Factor in genetics. Some families seem to have a longevity gene. Still we can thwart bad genes with good living and sabotage good genes with bad habits.

The shadow of regret comes over us of a certain age, “If we had known we were going to live this long, we would have taken better care of ourselves.” In his 80s, my German grandfather often remarked, “Ya, so soon old and so late smart.” I suspect that old age is more about being lucky than being smart.

Tomato Season

4 October 2012

Right now we are coming to the end of a special time for a lot of us—tomato season. A good fresh tomato gives such pleasure. A friend was all aglow when she told us how she spent last Saturday afternoon canning tomatoes. “*They look so pretty in the jar.*” That is seriously old school preservation. Admiring the finished product is half the pleasure. A younger friend told about the excess tomatoes she cut up and put in Ziploc bags each with

just enough for a batch of chili. As she said, “It was so easy.” Her tomatoes will *taste pretty* as the base of a steaming pot. One of these days when the right nip is in the air, it’ll be time to indulge in that cold weather staple.

Given the extreme heat and dryness of July, the tomatoes surprised us by being so flavorful and plentiful. So I may have over dosed on fresh salsa this summer. Nothing could easier or better. A little chopping, a bowl of tortilla chips and your delicious lunch is ready. As soon as her tomatoes were ripe, one friend fried a whole pound of bacon at a time, so she could serve a BLT on a moment’s notice. Works for me—the least amount of cooking for the most meals. Anyway who eats a BLT after tomato season? It’s depressing when we have to go back to store tomatoes which as we all know taste like cardboard. So might as well overdose on BLT’s, too.

Surprising how much small talk we make about tomatoes in their season. Does a tomato have to be red? How about all the heritage varieties— those burgundy, orange, yellow and green options? They do have ripe green tomatoes, but how do you know when they are ready to pick? These newcomers have a nice enough flavor, but they don’t taste red. The other day I saw a can of Campbell’s Yellow Tomato Soup on the shelf. What is that?

People who don’t live around here have rather limited notions about our seasons assuming there are four. We natives recognize many more. The tomato season is just one example.

Many of our favorites seem to connect to food. The morel season in spring is magical; it’s as much fun hunting as eating them. Finding a good watercress spot is equally satisfying although cleaning it isn’t always such a picnic. There are times for asparagus, strawberries and sweet corn—such good if fleeting days. One season gives way to another. Just as the tomatoes are at an end, the apple harvest is in full swing.

For our active friends, there are endless hunting seasons; turkey, duck, mourning dove and now wolf hunting. Deer hunting is so important to so many; it should really be a state holiday. We don’t observe President’s Day or Columbus Day like Iowa and other states, so we have room for a deer hunting holiday.

We fish for smelt, bass, blue gills and trout. Although I do not understand the attraction to ice fishing, I do enjoy watching people sit on their buckets and fish through a hole in the ice for hours. Makes me smile.

We also watch eagles in a winter, wait for the pelicans to pass through and enjoy the V’s of Canadian geese winging south or

north according to their unerring instincts. We await autumn leaves and first snowfalls.

And we watch football. Bring on the brats and beer. Dust off the cheese heads. Dig out the green and gold. It's Packer Season in Wisconsin!

For everything, there is a season.

Le Loup-garou

25 October 2012

The French Canadians who settled Prairie du Chien in the late 1700s brought their cultural traditions with them. Most societies have some sort of bogeyman; these inhabitants had le loup-garou—the wolf man. He haunts the Creoles and Cajuns of Louisiana who are also descendants of French Canada. There he is loogerou or roogeraou. Wolf man seems to have a universal appeal and shows up in the legends of many countries.

Le loup-garou comes sloshing out of the slough or the bayou on moonlit nights looking for victims, most often males. He searches for a target to whom he can transmit his curse. Le loup-garou is a normal, working man by day and a prowling wild animal by night. If le loup-garou makes contact with a man, he passes on his terrible power to the other.

Le loup-garou is a scary dude without any apparent redeeming qualities. His preferred victims were one of two types. He feasted on small children and thus struck fear into the hearts of parents everywhere. More often le loup-garou stole the souls of grown men. Clearly, le loup-garou was nobody to fool with. Once a man was transformed, his appetite was insatiable and his status permanent.

Since there was no turning back once afflicted, the only hope was to avoid an encounter with him. Parents needed to keep their small children close by especially on moonlit nights, particularly times of full moon. Naturally, children who obeyed their parents and said their prayers before bed were less appealing to le loup-garou. The good child must not be as tasty as the naughty one. People knew that le loup-garou shied away from anything religious—prayers, holy water, rosaries, crucifixes.

Women had more trouble with their men—their husbands, sons, brothers, fathers. They could keep them safe if they could just get them to go to mass each Sunday and stay away from the brandy. Knowing men, you can see what a tall order that was for the women, who from some reason were not victims of le loup-garou once they became women. Who could blame the good ladies if they nagged their men on Sunday and repeatedly reminded them

to forgo the spirits? Alas, despite their best efforts, more than a few men became victims on those seductive moonlit nights when the call of the brandy flask was too much to resist. Le loup-garou would be lying in wait for just such an opportunity, which he seized with relish. Another good man was lost to the ancient brotherhood.

The most dangerous time of the year is when the October Hunter's Moon is high. We are nearing that precarious time when he is so desperate to strike again. A word to the wise, if you see someone dressed in a wolf man costume this Halloween, be very wary. What you see, may actually be le terrible loup-garou in search of a victim.

Happy Halloween!

Flummoxed

November 2012

You've seen the cell phone ad where the salesperson is trying to get a customer to renew by promising him everything except reliable calling service. At the end of the ad, the customer asked if he could get out of the plan. The salesperson says, "Yes, just as soon as my furry friend travels around the world." His pal is shown in slow, slow-motion.

When I received my *Annual Notice of Changes for Part D Medicare*, that ad came to mind. I will comprehend Part D Medicare as soon as the furry friend makes it around the world.

Why is Part D separate from the rest of Medicare anyway; can someone answer me that? I was already flummoxed before I opened the packet. Inside are three booklets totaling 171 pages. The cover sheet offered a Multilanguage Interpreter in 16 languages including Hindi, Japanese, Polish, French Creole, Arabic, Russian, Korean, and Talalog. That's Filipino, which I recognize because I lived in the Philippines when I was a young teacher. That is, as they say, another story. I'd like an interpreter to give me the short version of Part D in English. And I would like someone to explain just why it has to be so complicated. This would have been a challenge decades ago when my mind was still working. Studying Medicare handbooks makes graduate level course work seem like kindergarten.

The first 119-page publication, which is not labeled in any understandable way, seems to be a user's manual. The first 10 pages explain what they have sent to me, and what they will send to me when I enroll or in my case, when I start paying the new fee which happens to be a 16% increase from last year. The deductible before coverage kicks in went up 30%. The bottom line as I

understand it— I'll be getting much less and paying a lot more. That's how it's been since I've been on Medicare. We have heard that inflation is not a problem in this troubled economy; I guess health care doesn't count.

Part D 101 seems to include four stages of coverage and four tiers of drugs. By now I am beyond baffled. I flip through the second booklet 2013 Formulary. That's a list of covered drugs for the uninitiated. They actually suggest that you familiarize yourself with the booklet and ask your doctor for a drug that is covered. On to booklet three; the Pharmacy Directory listed by pharmacy and by service, retail pharmacy, mail order, home infusion pharmacies and long term care pharmacies.

Lucky for me, I am taking no prescription drugs, so I can just file these away because as they warn me in bold letters. This is an important legal document; file it in a safe place.

I had put away the Part D communication when I went to the mailbox and found Medicare *and You 2013*, the official US government handbook. At the time of printing, they didn't know how much would be deducted from Social Security. I can go on line or get on the phone to get the latest information about payment. I don't have the heart to study the pages of changes for 2013. Maybe tomorrow.

And the furry friend hasn't moved at all.

The Toy Hall of Fame

December 6, 2012

A Toy Hall of Fame? Who knew? Just in time for the annual Christmas frenzy, the Toy Hall of Fame has announced its 2012 inductees— dominoes and Star Wars action figures. Their new total is 51.

Since 1998, a play museum has been inducting toys into its hall of fame. Currently the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, New York administers it. Take the online virtual tour to see the complete list of winners. You won't find many you don't recognize; more than a few will be old favorites.

Anyone can nominate a toy. The winners must have icon status and have been popular with several generations. They should foster discovery and creative play. The best ones have changed play in some important way or changed toy design.

The first year of nomination when all toys were possible choices, 11 were selected —Barbie, Crayola crayons, erector sets, Etch a Sketch, Frisbee, Legos, marbles, Monopoly, Play- Doh, Teddy Bears and Tinkertoys. Are these the best of the best?

Making the list are those common found objects that kids prefer over the most expensive of toys— the cardboard box, the blanket and the stick. Not until the 7th year of Awards was the box inducted. Pans and spoons have not made the list yet, but it's only a matter of time.

Hula-hoops, jacks, jump ropes and kites from my active girlhood days were there. Red Flyer wagons, bicycles, roller skates and skateboards recall the wish lists of my brothers. They always wanted BB guns, but no guns made the Toy Hall of Fame. Checkers, playing cards, Scrabble and jig saw puzzles occupied us in the long winter evenings and during vacations from school. After the TV came along, those social games were played a little less, but our TV viewing was limited. Too much staring at the TV couldn't be good for the eyes or the mind. We were expected to go outside and play.

I still have my favorite toy from childhood- a Mama and Papa Doll with a sky blue dress and bonnet. Turn it on its stomach and it cries, "Mama". Flip it its back for "Papa". Actually, the one I have was my second one. Two of my four brothers were playing catch with my first one. Things got a little out of hand, and one of the arms was detached in the fray. I didn't witness the accident so I never knew who to blame. I was heartbroken past any comforting. Since the doll was wrecked and I wouldn't go near it, they decided to take a look inside and check out the sound box. Soon after the doll disappeared never to be seen again. The next year when I got my second *Mama and Papa Doll*, my dad gave an executive order. None of the males in the house were to touch it or even look at it. That explains why 60 years later, she is in pristine condition. She did lose her shoes and socks along the way, but otherwise, she is like new and her sound box is as clear as ever.

This trip down memory lane led me to *Parent Magazine* which offers a list of the best new toys for 2012. *The Buckley Boo* is a soft and cuddly cat with an endless number of belts and buckles for toddlers learning to manipulate things. The *Rockboard Descender* is a skateboard on tracks for rough terrain and snowy hills. These might just be future Hall of Famers.

Good Things

December 27, 2012

I saw Martha Stewart on a cable channel the other day; in her all-knowing way she proclaimed homemade strawberry jam a *good thing*. I knew that already, but she did set me to thinking of the happy little events that fill our days if we bother to notice.

The past six years, my first productive act each day is to go off to Healthy Hearts for an hour of exercise. The atmosphere is pleasant, and the other participants never fail to brighten my day. The exercise keeps most aches and pains at bay and my blood pressure in check without medication. Healthy Hearts is a very good thing.

That reminds me of an older friend who used to tell me, “Build your good habits and they will take care of you in your old age.” She took a walk along the river every day until she couldn’t walk. Then she drove the route. I am a little surprised about how many people do a daily check of the river— rain, sleet or shine. As Martha would say, “That’s a good thing.”

During the recent Christmas season, I got a wonderful telephone call from a Grant County friend that I don’t see much anymore. She said she was calling some of her Christmas cards recipients. We caught up for about fifteen minutes; it was just good to hear from her. The Christmas call was such a good idea, I called several other friends. Perhaps they will pass the good thing forward. It’s more enjoyable getting the full update by phone rather than in a not so popular Christmas letters. Christmas letters and fruit cake will soon go the way of the Edsel and the typewriter.

Almost any conversation with a three year old is a treasure. Recently during a visit with my little friend, she asked me a pointed question. “What do you know about Jesus?” “Not as much as I should; what can you tell me about Jesus?”

She made direct eye contact and held it while she quietly assured me, “I can tell you one thing. Jesus loves you.” Her faith is simple and unshakeable. Talk about a profound theological discussion especially in a time when little heads are so filled with Santa Claus there is no room for Baby Jesus.

As I was finishing this piece, my little dog decided to jump up on my lap and my papers and lick my face. I strongly discourage licking, but sometimes she cannot restrain herself and will take whatever scolding is sure to follow. This is especially true when my attention has been directed away from her a little too long. Her tail wagging enthusiasm for me is a very good thing— annoying but good.

So for today, why not join Martha and me and sweat the small stuff that fills up your days with very good things. In fact, I resolve to appreciate the many good things that find their way to me every day in 2013. There’s a pretty good chance I can actually keep this one.



Vintage New Year's Card 1912