The Word on Main Street

BETTER

Mr. Fred, living it up on the Gulf Coast, passed this one along.

A man walked into a bar and ordered a glass of white wine. He took a sip of the wine, then tossed the remainder into the bartender's face.

Before the bartender could recover from the surprise, the man began weeping.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really sorry. I keep doing that to bartenders. I can't tell you how embarrassing it is to have a compulsion like this."

Far from being angry, the bartender was sympathetic. Before long, he was suggesting that the man see an analyst about his problem.

"I happen to have the name of a psychoanalyst," the bartender said. "My brother and my wife have both been treated by him, and they say he's as good as they get."

The man wrote down the name of the doctor, thanked the bartender, and left. The bartender smiled, knowing he'd done a good deed for a fellow human being.

Six months later, the man was back. "Did you do what I suggested?" the bartender asked, serving the glass of white wine.

"I certainly did," the man said. "I've been seeing the psychoanalyst twice a week." He took a sip of the wine. Then, he threw the remainder into the bartender's face.

The flustered bartender wiped his face with a towel. "The doctor doesn't seem to be doing you any good." He sputtered.

"On the contrary," the man claimed, "he's done me world of good."

"But you threw the wine in my face again!" The bartender exclaimed.

"Yes," the man replied. "But, it doesn't embarrass me anymore."

KID LOGIC

These came in over the transom.

• I was driving with my three young children one warm summer evening when a woman in the convertible ahead of us stood up and waved. She was stark naked!

As I was reeling from the shock, I heard my 5-year-old shout from the back seat, "Mom! That lady isn't wearing a seat belt!"

• A woman was trying hard to get the ketchup out of the jar. During her struggle, the phone rang, so she asked her 4-year-old daughter to answer the phone.

"Mommy can't come to the phone to talk to you right now. She's hitting the bottle."

• A little boy got lost at the YMCA and found himself in the women's locker room. When he was spotted, the room burst into shrieks, with ladies grabbing towels and running for cover.

The little boy watched in amazement and then asked, "What's the matter, haven't you ever seen a little boy before?"

• While taking a routine vandalism report at an elementary school, I was interrupted by a little girl about 6 years old. Looking up and down at my uniform, she asked, "Are you a cop?"

"Yes," I answered and continued writing the report.

"My mother said, if I ever needed help, I should ask the police. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right," I told her.

"Well, then," she said as she extended her foot toward me, "would you please tie my shoe?"

• It was the end of the day when I parked my police van in front of the station. As I gathered my equipment, my K-9 partner, Jake, was barking, and I saw a little boy staring in at me.

"Is that a dog you've got back there?" he asked.

"It sure is," I replied.

Puzzled, the boy looked at me and then toward the back of the van. Finally, he said, "What'd he do?"

• While working for an organization that delivers lunches to elderly shut-ins, I used to take my 4-year-old daughter on my afternoon rounds.

She was unfailingly intrigued by the various appliances of old age, particularly the canes, walkers, and wheelchairs.

One day, I found her staring at a pair of false teeth soaking in a glass. As I braced myself for the inevitable barrage of questions, she merely turned and whispered, "The Tooth Fairy will never believe this!"

• A little girl had just finished her first week of school.

"I'm just wasting my time," she said to her mother. "I can't read; I can't write and they won't let me talk!"

EXERCISE

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Frankly Speaking

by Frank W. Mercer



A difficult decision

Following years of attempting to quietly sell the publications which make up Main Street Media, Inc. as a group, we recently made the decision to liquidate the newspapers individually.

Additionally, we decided it was best to go public with the effort. This decision in no way reflects a change in the company's core belief that newspapers are vital to small towns. That mission has been the foundation of the company since Jack Krier started putting the group together and remains the guiding principle today.

This decision is purely one of finances. There's an old saying which goes, "If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging." Sometimes when you believe so much in what you're doing and love doing it, it's tough to put the shovel down.

For MSM, that time has come. Jack would often say that, when towns lost their school or their newspaper, they lost their identity. That remains true, but we have strong hopes that new ownership will step forward to take up the cause and keep the publications operating long into the future.

That hope based is based on prior experience. After the decision was made to sell our Missouri division, nearly all of those papers continued to operate or were consolidated. Not all remained open though, so we are making every effort to avoid any closings if that is at all possible.

That is why we have taken the unusual step of going public with the effort. You've all seen the stories of newspapers going dark with no advance warning to employees or subscribers. It takes a big toll on the staff and the communities.

When selling the Missouri publications the efforts of the employees and the communities at large were vital to creating a positive outcome.

In the case of three papers in Lafayette County, employees pitched the idea to the local chamber of commerce who immediately saw the value of keeping a trusted news source alive in their community. Those newspapers now operate under the umbrella of the chamber, a solution which never would have occurred to this old newspaper guy. There are undoubtedly many other workable solutions to explore.

We announced this decision to our employees last week; and before this column was even started, there has been an outpouring of interest. Three of the 17 publications have already been spoken for in a handshake agreement. Only the paperwork remains for completion of the deal.

It's inarguable that the business climate for newspapers is much, much more difficult than it has ever been.

Our company has had large losses for multiple years straight. While many of the publications still break even or show some profit, it isn't enough to offset the ones which lose money and to sustain the corporate expenses required to keep things running.

Putting together a group of small newspapers operating out of small towns was never a recipe for riches. Jack did it because he believed in the mission, and deserved praise for the fact that multiple papers survived which would have closed otherwise. He was also proud that some of the prior owners were able to get something back from their years-long investment when they were faced with locking the doors and getting nothing. As the business districts in the small towns where we call home declined, so too did the advertising revenue required to keep the newspapers afloat. The internet convinced many business owners that they no longer needed to spend money to advertise their businesses. It's very hard to compete against free, no matter how many subscribers a newspaper might have. There is only one thing that keeps newspapers operating and that is advertising revenue. It's not a secret, publishers say it all the time. Subscriptions are vital, but are at best a break-even proposition. Everything else in the paper costs money to produce.

I, for one, strongly believe there is a path forward for newspapers. Not too long ago, large publishing groups were eager for additional titles. Now, for the most part, those groups have pulled back in the face of the same economic challenges facing MSM.

However, there seems to be quite a resurgence of smaller groups, or standalone newspapers. It's not nearly enough to offset the overall trend in the industry, but it is very encouraging.

While it's been tough for small newspapers, the big papers and groups have had it much worse. Small-market readers and advertisers have remained much more loyal to "their" newspaper. And, believe me, communities still think of newspapers as "theirs."

Unfortunately they often think of it more like a utility, say gas or electric service. Something you need, but assume will always be available. There are innovations being made in the industry which are exciting to watch as they emerge. As for me, I've seen plenty of changes in the industry with a career going all the way back to missing "hot type" printing by just one week, right up through the challenges of the internet age. It's time I stood aside and let others, who are more eager and have more energy take up the challenge. Newspapers still provide a vital function across the country, and don't get the respect that they deserve in return. Newspapers record history as it happens. A printed newspaper is immediately part of the permanent record. No other media can truthfully make that claim. You can't replace that permanence with a legal notice buried on a government website with no traffic, although, heaven knows, legislatures are constantly trying to make it happen. Weddings, births, deaths, public notices, the goings on of government, happenings at churches, sports victories and defeats, they're all right at your fingertips in the newspaper.

All of that is worth saving.Thankfully, there has been interest expressed in acquiring our remaining publications, and that is coming from leads generated by the broker, and by our employees who got advance notice.

We are confident that now that our decision in being made public in the pages of our newspapers, many more leads will develop. If you, or someone you know has an interest, please contact Kelli Bultena at Dirks, Van Essen & April by e-mail at kelli@dirksvanessen.com.

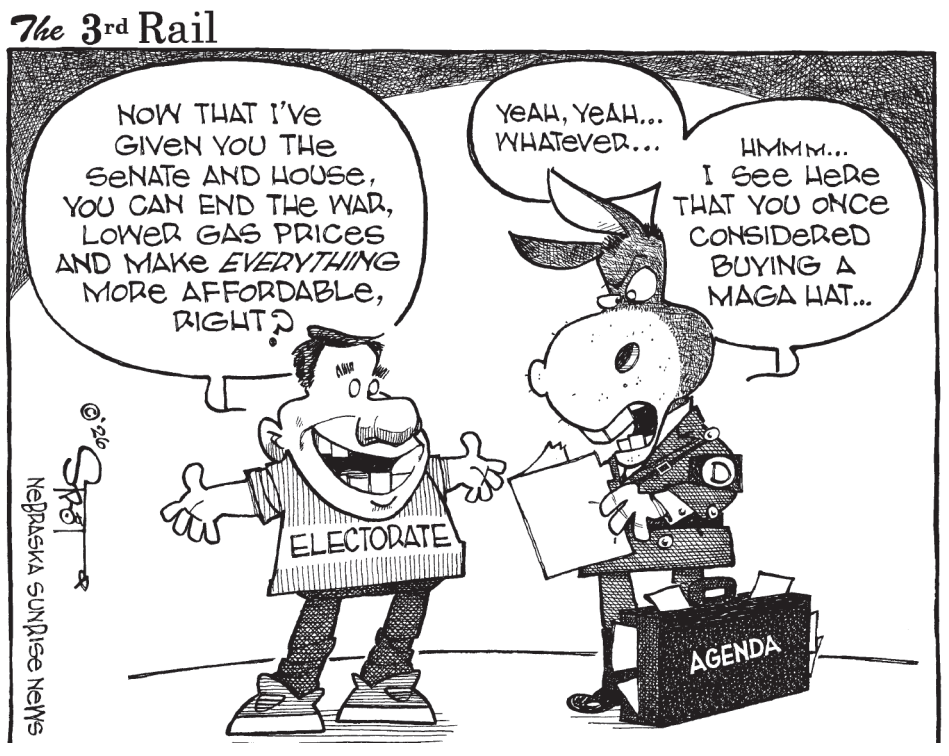
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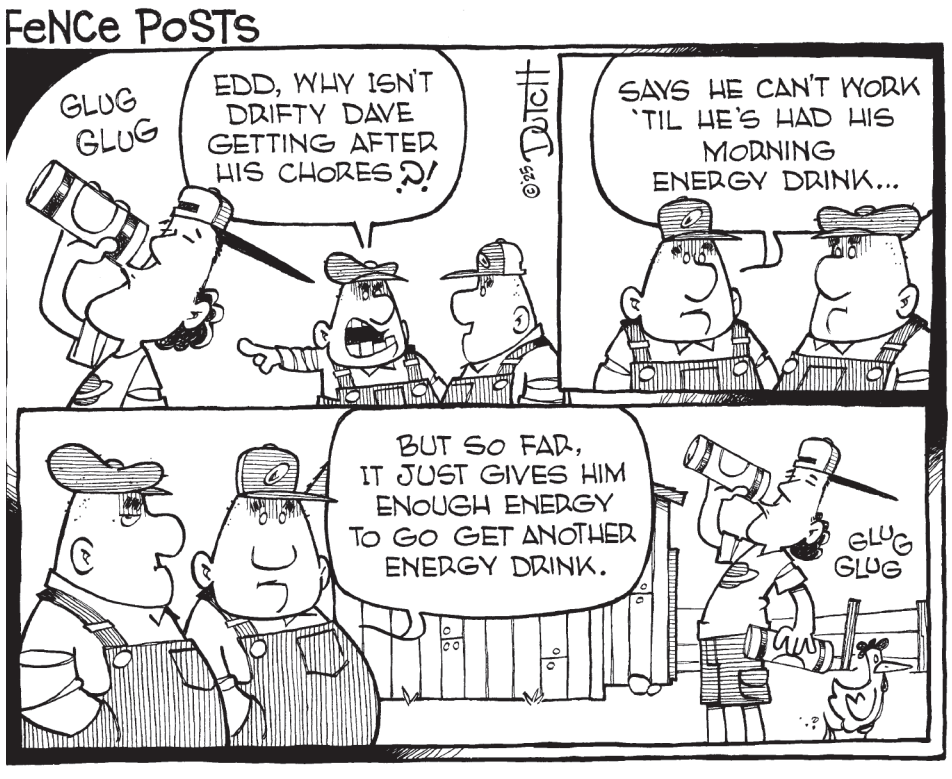
When the seasons begin to change, you will hear people say, "I can feel it, the weather's going to change." Like their body is telling them something is coming...you have only two options when it comes. You can either embrace it, or fight it...and I'll tell you, after many years in this chair, the changing of the seasons will always win out.

By now you've seen our front page this week announcing the dissolution of Main Street Media, and as much as I didn't want that change to come quite yet, it has arrived, and a new season is upon me.

Rumors of "newspaper closing their doors now" will likely run rampant through the communities we serve, bad news always travels faster than the good, and dissolving a company is never looked at as 'good news.' I'm here to tell you,

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