

Monday's Commentary

Come ride with Chuck in the big hot air balloon

It seemed like a simple enough assignment. "Go out to the Jaycees' July Fest and take a ride in the hot air balloon they have out there," my editor told me. "Just talk to some people and write a story on it."

So I said, yeah, sure, why not? Especially since it was either covering the balloon ride or going to the square dance at the Downtown Center. I opted for the balloon in the sky instead of the balloon dresses at the dance.

I first began having apprehensions about the assignment the day before. I got home from the office early, so I tuned in my favorite TV personality, Bill Kennedy. The movie of the day was "You Can't Cheat an Honest Man," with W.C. Fields. It was a good flick, until they got to the hot air balloon scene.

In it, W.C. cuds loose a balloon while Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy are in it. The two drift around for a while until they are finally forced to parachute.

Since the movie was a comedy, the scene should have been funny. But somehow, it was wasted on me. The mere thought of being cast adrift in a free balloon unnerved me. But when they had to jump with a parachute — at that point I turned off the TV.

I spent most of the next day trying to think of an honorable way to back out of the assignment. The only idea I could come up with was to call into work and tell them I couldn't come in because I hurt myself falling down the steps.

But the mere thought of falling DOWN anywhere was too frightening. After considering that, with such a lame excuse, the ax might fall on me, I decided I'd better go to work.

THE BALLOON RIDE wasn't until the evening, but I was worthless for the whole day. I kept getting a feeling as if I was falling, similar to those you get

just before waking up from a nightmare. I was in the middle of one of those sinking feelings when I got a phone call from a friend.

"What're you doin' tonight?" he asked. "Oh, uh, I got to work."

"Oh, yeah? Where at?" "I gotta write a story on this balloon ride at a carnival," I answered sheepishly.

"Hey, that sounds like it would be a good time," my friend answered. "You don't sound so excited about it, though. You afraid of heights or somethin'?"

"No, not really," I shot back. Then I made the mistake of adding, "But, you know, that thing goes up 150 feet."

My friend went crazy. "You are scared, aren't you?" He started to laugh, but controlled himself enough to start with the digs.

"That's too bad," he said, still chuckling to himself. "I wanted to go to the movie tonight. You know, see 'The Hindenberg'?"

I didn't think it was very funny, but my buddy was certainly having a good time.

"HOW ABOUT 'High Anxiety'?" You know, the one where Mel Brooks is afraid of falling?" My friend started to laugh even harder. "Or how about 'Mirage'?"

where Gregory Peck accidentally pushes this guy out a window?" His laughter was coming in longer spurts, and I realized he was just warming up. Before he could get out his next, "Or how about," I said good-bye and hung up, swearing he was now a "former friend."

It was late afternoon, and it was time to head out to the field where the carnival was being held. The fear was moving within me, and I began to realize there was no way I was going to get out of this. I got into the car with our photographer for the ride, and I didn't utter a word the whole trip.

"The guy didn't show," one of the

Jaycees told us as we pulled into the entrance to the carnival. It was the best piece of news I'd heard in two days, maybe longer. We drove in and parked, anyway, and I joined a group of Jaycees and added my own curses to theirs as to the lack of the balloonist, while inside I felt a surge of relief.

"Hey, there he is now!" one of the Jaycees yelled, pointing to a pick-up just pulling into the lot. Someone had just pulled the rug, or in this case, the earth, from under my feet.

We watched the balloonists start pumping up the huge air bag, and while the photographer shot some pictures, I figured I might as well ask some questions. At least it would keep my mind off the ride, I figured.

HOW MUCH DO these things cost?" I asked Lucretia Ray, an assistant to the balloonist. "\$12,000," was her answer. "You couldn't pay me that much to go up in that thing was the thought running through my mind."

"What else do you do with these things?" was my next question. "People hire them out for rides. They pay \$150 for a one-hour ride," she answered.

Not-so-cheap-thrills. "Hey, you guys go next," the balloonist, Guy Gauthier, cried to us from the balloon's basket. The first pair of cus-

tomers sailed upward, farther and farther into the sky, as the photographer's eyes and my own followed it until we were looking almost straight up.

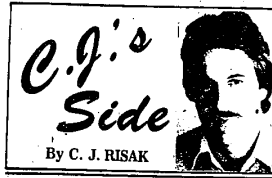
"My God, I'm not going up there," the photographer muttered. We both turned around and started walking quickly away, but then we spotted our editor, staring at us from a nearby crowd. He didn't say anything, he just pointed to the balloon, mouthed the word "or," and made a chopping motion at his neck, like that of an ax.

We got the message. We slowly walked back to the balloon, just as it was coming back down with a pair of very white people. The sight as they climbed out of the basket as fast as they could was not a reassuring one.

But we got in the basket and we did it. I kept yelling over to my editor, "I want hazard pay," but he said he never heard me. I just kept my eyes glued to my notebook and fired questions at the balloonist, even though my pen was as dry as my mouth.

The photographer looked up from the sight of his camera once and said, "Guess look how high we are." Needless to say, I paid no attention.

But we did it. It goes to show you, the life of a reporter is never easy. Looking back, it really wasn't that bad. But I wouldn't want to do it again.



Up and away went many Farmington area residents who attended the Farmington Jaycees' Fest at the corner of Drake and Twelve Mile. Joining them was Farmington Observer staff writer Chuck Risak. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

Willoughby lures voters with beer, pizza platform

"I forgot." The voice boomed throughout our compact newsroom.

While my ears told me it was someone doing a bad imitation of comedian Steve Martin, my brain telegraphed that it was the town tippler and chief political gadfly, Willoughby Wink.

"Where's Barnaby?" Reluctantly, I peeked my head around the corner. Sure enough, it was our stout and wobbly friend.

"Come on in, Willoughby, and have a seat."

"Barnaby, I forgot to file my petitions in time to be a Farmington Hills city council candidate," complained Willoughby. "I thought it was a 4:30 p.m. deadline on Tuesday."

"You weren't the only one, Wink."

"Ya, I know. There were two other guys, an Anzovor and Terzian, right in front of me who also forgot. But what the heck, I didn't have enough signatures, anyway."

"You're in good company, Willoughby. A guy named Schaeffer didn't have enough signatures, either. At least you don't have to feel like the Lone Ranger when it comes to screwing up on the election laws."

Willoughby took off his rumpled Gatsby cap and scratched his balding head.

"It's too bad, you know, I had some important issues to talk about in this election. What will I do now?" he queried.

"How about supporting one of the candidates who figured out how to file correctly?" I retorted, sorry that I had asked the question. Willoughby has a way of popping in on deadline days when time is of the essence. And Willoughby is anything but shortwinded.

"I can't find a candidate who will agree with me. But I've been thinking of another angle."

"What's that?" Curiosity had gotten the better of me.

"I'm going to run as a write-in candidate."

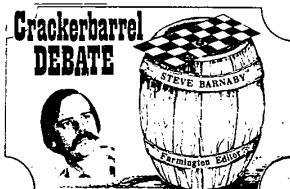
"Willoughby, how many signatures did you get on your petitions?"

"Well, I was just short of the required 99."

"C'mon, Willoughby, how short of 99 were you?" Uncomfortably, he shifted in the chair.

"Oh, by about 80 signatures."

"Willoughby, how in the heck do you expect to get



elected on a write-in campaign when all you had was 18 signatures on your petitions?"

"My platform's the thing," he said in his best Shakespearean tones.

"Okay, I'll bite. What's your platform going to be?"

"Free beer and pizza for everyone. Now I can't think of another candidate with such a unique idea. Everybody likes beer and pizza."

"But Willoughby, out here the folks might interpret that as socialism. Most people around these parts aren't akin to the idea of a free ride from the government."

"Wrong, Mr. Editor. When it comes to appetites, the stomach always overrules the brain. I expect to be the top vote getter."

My patience had just about reached capacity. Even my frustration over voter apathy hasn't led me to believe such drivel.

"Willoughby, there are a lot more important issues than beer and pizza."

"Like what?" he challenged, thrusting out his chin defiantly.

"Try senior citizen housing, park development and developing this city's tax base so homeowners aren't taxed out of their houses."

"Barnaby, you're just one of those bleeding heart liberals. I'll show you that what's really on the minds of the people is their stomachs," he said, mischievously rubbing his more than ample waistline.

Triumphantly, Willoughby marched out of the office on to Farmington Road. Certainly appears as though Farmington Hills' voters will have a variety of candidates to choose from, anyway.

The Flip Side by craig piechura



Let 'em wear fur

Good olé Yankee ingenuity faces its biggest challenge since the days before drip-dry pants and Saran Wrap.

The challenge? How to keep the Upper Middle Class (UMC) looking fashionable and cool in the summer and snug and snazzy in the winter while still adhering to the President's temperature standards.

After all, how utterly gauche to be labeled an energy hog.

Diesel automobiles were the rage in the affluent suburbs earlier this year in response to the oil embargo. The latest challenge is to be comfortably chic in public buildings that are cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

Fret not, sophisticates. Bring that chin up as high as the nose. Because Bess Edwards of Troy has just the thing for the energy-conscious fashion plate: Sleeveless fur vests and matching fur accessories that can be worn year-round by people of either sex.

"I could envision women shivering in offices, stores, schoolrooms and other places of employment," says Ms. Edwards. "I found absolutely no evidence that anyone had considered the indoor fur concept and certainly no hint that fur has been worn next to the body since caveman days."

Mrs. Edwards, who's between jobs, is hoping the idea will catch on with a clothier, furrier or anyone else with capital for her idea.

Asked if it wasn't just a bit incongruous for a person willing to spend more than \$500 for a furry vest to worry about the economic implications of saving a couple dollars on the heating bill, Mrs. Edwards said one should not assume that the beautiful people are in the midst of a money crisis. But even the high society can be uncomfortable in public with the new federal energy standards for public buildings, Mrs. Edwards notes.

She figures she's got both temperature extremes covered with her line of furs called the Chill Factor and an scarf-like accessory called the Furbelow. If you're cold in the winter, wear the fur indoors. If you're hot in the summer and want to be stylish, no sweat — these sleeveless pelts can be worn over bare skin.

"Of course, it might be a bit much for the office," admits Ms. Edwards.

Indeed. The coffee break crowd might get jealous and deliver one lump or two to the chic receptionist or filing clerk who worked all year to be able to afford a fur vest.

Mrs. Edwards wore prototypes of some of these garments at a store where she used to work and says the sleeveless furs drew raves. She even met with officials of the exclusive Neiman-Marcus department store in Dallas who offered her encouragement but didn't pick up her option.

"I have every reason to believe they are or will be copied and ready for winter market and Christmas catalogs," said Ms. Edwards.

She's probably right. Neiman-Marcus is the same firm that offered such practical items as His 'n' Her torseles a few years back in their Christmas catalog.

BUT ENOUGH of the proletarian put-downs. There are probably a few readers out there just

dying to hear me describe the Chill Factor fur line. Listen up, darlings, but I'll let Ms. Edwards describe the pieces, since the only fur I ever got close to had a head on it with a tail in its mouth and hung around the neck of my great grandmother.

"After weeks of deliberating, sketching, changing and redoing, the first garment emerged," she explained. "(It is) sleeveless for freedom of movement, for wear over almost any garment with long sleeves and even a slender-fitted winter coat. Its length is long enough to cover the beltline and no more. It features an unbroken line across the front which takes this garment out of the ordinary, front-opening, jacket class."

Whatever you do, don't call it a mink poncho, like I made the mistake of doing. But, excuse the interruption, let's do go on.

"Next, I opened another garment down the front, which is actually quite ordinary," she continued. "Then I wanted to reach for a bigger market. For economic reasons, the only way I could reach that young customer and still stay with mink, was to use less of it. That's when I designed the low V neck, open in front, vest style, with mink only in front."

With the good response she got, she heard women asking for fur vests for their men friends. Voila. Ms. Edwards whipped up an otter vest and a muskrat wrap for the male of the species.

All I can say is it sure beats those lumpy, down vests that everybody was wearing last winter. A drive through Ann Arbor looked like an invasion of Michelin Men.

I wish Ms. Edwards luck with selling her fur line. She is a nice woman who probably deserves better treatment than she'll get from this column.

But I can't resist making one last snide suggestion. If she wants to sell her stuff in Neiman-Marcus' Christmas catalog, maybe she ought to make fur-lined turtle-neck sweaters as an accessory for those His 'n' Her tortoisenes. Now that'd be an exclusive, socially-significant, energy-conscious design. Trouble is, it'd probably be a slow mover.

It's mid-year. Do you remember the New Year's resolutions you made last Jan. 1? How are you doing on them?

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