

Monday, November 17, 1980



Craig
Piechura

County government 1980



WIM
OBSERVER RECENTRIC PAPERS

There ain't nobody at the helm

In legal terms, it was a case of corpus delectabile. If the following sounds smug, or appears disrespectful, let me explain. Sometimes one must laugh to keep from crying.

I'm talking about the untimely death of Buddy, my loyal parakeet for more than five years.

Buddy was in perfect health, thanks to Hartz Mountain and the occasional carrot greens. He greeted each new day with a song. He'd echo my "Hello" with a whistle that sounded something like the same, at least to me.

He was a one-man bird. I loved him like a friend, and now he's gone. Buddy never really talked to me, he chattered. But he always had time to share a sip of Stroh's beer straight from the bottle.

Ah, memories. There was the time he swooped down to do a three-point landing smack dab in the French onion chip dip. I had to rescue him from the sticky mire. Funny, no one but me had the taste for chip dip after that.

I remember how, when I'd change his seed, he'd give me a playful nip on the knuckle. This was understandable and not malicious. Put yourself in the bird's place. How would you like a hand twice as big as you are reaching in your front door?

These are the things you remember about a loved one when it's too late.

BUDDY DID NOT simply die or moult away like most good parakeets. Rather, he was devoured by my wife Louise's cat, Scooter, while we were away for the day.

Honest. Sometimes people think I make this stuff up, but this is for real. Painful to say, every word is true. Incidentally, it should be noted that I've known the bird a lot longer than I've known Louise, my wife of only six weeks.

But I don't blame Louise for the delinquency of her pet. I really don't even blame the cat — that miserable, whiny, little feline who thinks it's great sport to trip me up when I'm walking to the bathroom in the dark. After all, can man undo what instinct has wrought? I fear not.

We thought we had taken all the proper precautions. We would jock the cat in the bedroom when we let the bird fly around the apartment to leave tokens of his appreciation on the window sill or someone's shoulder.

The cage was kept way up near the ceiling and months passed without even a close call. We began to believe second-hand stories of households where cats and birds peacefully co-existed.

Little did we know the cat was making elaborate plans. And while we were away, the cat did slay.

Scooter, who is going through kitty puberty, scaled to the top of a slick plastic bookcase and knocked the cage halfway down. The rest is grisly history.

I didn't even get to give my Buddy a decent burial in a shoebox because all that was left was his right foot, or talon, which Scooter left on the bedspread as a trophy of his first hunting expedition.

No blood, no guts, just feathers and a foot.

I found the foot when I stretched out on the bed after completing the trauma of vacuuming up all the feathers in the living room. I felt a sharp stab in the back.

YOU JUST can't imagine what it's like to vacuum up a friend's remains and then feel his foot clinging to your sweater.

Buddy, you deserved better. Because I wasn't around in your time of need, I figure the least I can do is give you the best obituary a birdie ever had.

As best I can determine, Buddy was born in 1974 in either the Canary Isles or the aisles of Woolworth's.

He was a present to me on my 23rd birthday. I'd hinted around for a canary but canaries cost 50 bucks, so the folks opted for a dime store parakeet.

I never regretted the substitution. No canary could have brought a person more pleasure than this plucky parakeet.

Buddy was sold to my sister for \$20 in a package deal that included a cage with a little bell that Buddy regarded as a sacred object.

About his only fault, if it can be called one, was Buddy's drinking problem. He liked his beer — to a fault.

An unscrupulous friend who works for this newspaper overdid it with the Stroh's one night and got. Buddy drank while I was out picking up a pizza. Buddy had a hard time wading his way back to the cage that evening. The next morning I found the bird standing wobbly on the gravel paper; his feathers ruffled and his gizzard dry. From then on, he had the taste.

They say in heaven there is no beer. For Buddy's sake I hope they are wrong.

Buddy was murdered, or martyred, on Sunday, Oct. 25, my Dad's birthday. In a sort of burial-at-sea ritual, I flushed my feathered friend's talon down the toilet. Then I tossed his cage in the dumpster out back.

All I have left to remember him by is the sacred bell. I rang it the other night and it drove the cat crazy.

Somehow I think Buddy would have wanted it that way.

For the average voter, it's easy to figure out whom to vote for in the federal government. You vote for the president and vice president as a team, a couple of U.S. senators and your friendly local congressman — four altogether.

In county government, however, you have a nightmare wading through the list of persons to be elected.

The poor Wayne County voter puts up with a prosecutor, clerk, treasurer, sheriff, register of deeds, three members of the Board of Auditors and your friendly local commissioner. And even then, the voter doesn't know who's in charge.

It's somewhat better in Oakland County. A single county executive replaces the three-member Board of Auditors, and the executive is in charge of all departments that aren't under an elected chief. And the budget gets balanced.

A WAYNE County commissioner once explained why that government is in such a mess, runs eight-digit deficits year after year and has no accountability.

"A department head has no single boss to report to. He finds and cultivates 14 friendly commissioners out of the 27 and gets his budget passed."

"There's no one with overall authority to come up with a unified, balanced budget. A board of 27 can't administer county government."

Those may not have been Bill Joyner's exact words, but I have been faithful to his meaning.

HERE ARE SOME examples — half horrible, half comic — of how Wayne County government operates:

● Did you think the elected prosecutor is the chief lawyer for the county, the way the attorney general is for the U.S. government? Not so. Back in 1971, the Board of Commissioners set up an office



Tim
Richard

of Corporation Counsel to handle civil matters. The elected prosecutor, as I get the picture, handles mainly criminal matters.

● The Road Commission runs county parks, but the Sheriff's Department polices them.

● The County Planning Department plans use of county properties except for parks and roads. Those are planned by the staff of the Road Commission.

● Review and approval of new subdivisions is not a function of the County Planning Commission or Planning Department. It's a function of the Plat Board, which consists of one register of deeds (as chairman), the county clerk, the treasurer and the three members of the Board of Auditors.

● The drain commissioner administers the drain laws and gets into the business of storm and sanitary drains. Somewhere along the line, however, the Board of Commissioners gave the Road Commission authority over flood control of the Rouge River.

● The county clerk keeps birth and death records for all communities outside the city of Detroit. Just why Detroit, which has all its urban problems to deal with, handles its own birth and death records I cannot explain. They just do it that way.

● The Wayne County Cooperative Extension Service is the joint venture of the county government, Michigan State University and the federal government.



Darlene
Stinson

drinkers die young. So, they passed a law which they believed would improve society.

But people who thought the law silly simply brewed beer in their basements. They proved that you can't protect people against themselves.

I suspect that the 21-year-old drinking law will be just as ineffective in 1980.

The cold truth of the matter is that 19-year-olds no longer consider themselves children. They've already graduated from high school. They can vote, go to war, marry, apply for loans and even have kids before the magical age of 21.

Unlike high school kids only a few years younger, they're expected to begin mapping out a course for their lives in earnest. Many are on their own for the first time on some college campus. Others are working or scouring the streets for jobs.

Most consider drinking their right — no matter what the law says. If they don't want to drink they won't. But no law which they perceive as age discrimination will stop them from mixing a cocktail if they want one.

THAT CERTAINLY was the case on that recent Saturday afternoon when a young woman got very drunk at a football game.

That certainly was the case at another football game on another college campus 10 years ago,

● The most important function of government — drafting the budget proposal — is handled by a three-member Board of Auditors. If you want to win some tavern bets, ask a political loudmouth to name all three. (How's this for balance: their names are Proctor, Kelly and Mrozowski. One is black, and you can guess the ancestry of the other two.)

● There is an office of the County Medical Examiner. Remember them? They lost track of the body of that Birmingham lawyer who died in a health club. Anyway, this function is under neither the sheriff nor the Health Department, but the 27-member Board of Commissioners. How's that for accountability?

● The Civil Defense office, which you would think would be under the sheriff, isn't. It's under the Board of Commissioners.

● You would guess the Bureau of Taxation would be under the treasurer, wouldn't you? Dummy. It, too, is under the Board of Commissioners.

● The Office of Program Development — now there's a logical function to be under the budget-making Board of Auditors, or possibly the Planning Department, right? Dummy, again. It's under the Board of Commissioners.

COUNTY GOVERNMENT is a jungle of tangled lines of authority, of little territorial claims of predators.

Perhaps the Wayne County Charter Commission can clean up some of the tangle, and maybe voters will adopt a county charter with a tough executive in it.

Meanwhile, the situation is like the cartoon in which a young draftee was about to become a civilian after two years of military service. His DI, a Sgt. Snorkel type, pleaded with the soldier to reenlist, using as his clinching argument:

"You don't really want to be a civilian, do you. There ain't nobody in charge out there!"

when the drinking age also was 21.

In this particular case, the drunk young woman was my roommate, Linda, age 19, who was a good student and usually quite rational and mature.

Linda went to a football game and drank a great deal of Ripple. Linda's parents drove up to East Lansing to take Linda out to dinner following the game.

But Linda was too drunk, too sick and too embarrassed to see them. She hid in the bathroom and made me — her loyal roommate — make up excuses on why their daughter wasn't around.

Linda didn't like being sick. I didn't like fabricating excuses. And her parents didn't like the fact that their daughter had "forgotten" their date.

But Linda, who later apologized to her parents, learned from the experience. She had abused alcohol — like many people both young and old. I never saw her that intoxicated again.

The point is that the 21-year-old drinking law didn't cap her bottle of Ripple. But apparently, most voters view the problem differently.

Obviously, that 30-year-old woman who attended a football game last month couldn't recall similar experiences from her own young adult years.

She probably was too busy sipping peppermint schnapps in the "adult" section of the stadium to remember that alcohol potentially can harm anyone.