

More than green beer deserves our attention

Warning: This column is something other than a traditional St. Patrick's Day treatise. Those who are offended by discussions on religion and politics should be prepared to be offended. Those with open minds, enjoy.

As a child I had a difficult time understanding why my brother and I were among the minority of people in the world who didn't wear green on St. Patrick's Day. As a matter of fact, my mother, father, grandfather and grandmother never wore green.

One day curiosity, as it always does, got the best of me and I asked why.

"You're English," came the curt reply from a usually genial mother.

Now that inquiry was made many years ago, and several St. Patrick's Day parades have passed down Woodward since. Admittedly, a good time has been had by multitudes sloshing down green beer and generally raising hell, all in the name of Elre.

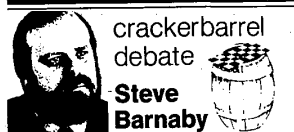
SAY NOW, mates, I'm among the last person in the world to criticize a bunch of folks for going out and tipping a few. Been known to do that a couple times myself.

As a matter of fact, in the last year I've got to know about this Irish business more than I ever dreamed possible. One of my reporters is what one would modestly label Super Irish. She and her family really enjoy it.

Between her and my equally Irish receptionist, I've finally been convinced that wearing an orange shirt on St. Patrick's Day is inappropriate.

I've also learned a lot about a culture of which I really knew little as a young man. This year, as a matter of fact, I was just about ready to get into the swing of things when a grim reminder passed my eyes.

"A bomb blitz across Northern Ireland Monday night killed a nine-year-old boy and injured at least 15 people," said the news item tucked away in my morning newspaper.



crackerbarrel
debate
Steve
Barnaby

I won't tell you who was blamed or who took responsibility for this sickening act of terror. At this point, it's inconsequential.

WHAT IS significant is that the generally affluent people of this country have become hardened, desensitized to the world around them. Like the Romans of a decadent empire, we drunkenly celebrate while the world around us has come under the

control of terrorists.

Now I care little under what banner they proclaim their terror — the Irish Republican Army, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Red Brigade or some right wing Central American militia — they all are putrid boils on the face of humanity.

Unfortunately, too many persons in this country have opted out on their responsibility to strive for peace. We have influence far beyond our ability to sell bombs and bombers to whatever political rowdies are chic at the time.

If anything, St. Patrick's Day should be a time for somber reflection — a rededication toward the goal of a peaceful world.

It should be a day when we urge our political leaders to break down the walls of isolationism and once again become a country known as initiators of peace rather than an arsenal for terror.

Believe me, on that day I'll don a green shirt and tip a few to the old sod.



Tim
Richard

Big trucks, bad roads — a connection?

Did you ever hear an argument delivered with great technical brilliance, but you came away with a gut feeling it was all wrong?

The ancient Greeks had a word for it: sophistry. Sophists were teachers of rhetoric and politics who were notorious for their clever but implausible notions.

The word "sophistry" came to mind as I perused a Michigan Department of Transportation memo about truck weight limits. The M-DOT people don't think weight limits need to be lowered.

POSSIBLY, JUST possibly, you have noticed that our freeways, state highways and county roads are in abysmal shape.

If you don't bump downward into potholes, you bump upward from hitting patches on top of patches. This year our roads are the worst they have been in about two decades.

The money isn't there to make repairs and do resurfacing. Our vehicles are burning less fuel, so we're paying less gasoline tax. Our cars are lighter, so we are paying less weight tax.

Now you would think our roads should be in better shape, not worse, because our cars are lighter. But our trucks haven't become any lighter. Indeed, Michigan has the highest limits in the nation for gross vehicle weights. Our gross load limit is about 164,000 pounds compared to the 73,000 to 80,000 mandated by most other states, according to M-DOT.

Moreover, if you have an impression the number of big rigs is increasing, you are entirely correct. "In 1978, 2,630 had gross vehicle weights of 130,000 pounds or more, whereas, in 1989, there were only 1,411 such units registered. Thus in 10 years the number of such units has more than doubled," said M-DOT Director John P. Woodford.

M-DOT ARGUES that it isn't gross weight which damages roads. It's axle weight.

In Michigan, an 11-axle truck grossing 164,000 pounds has 13,000 pounds of weight on the majority of its axles.

In contrast, a five-axle truck hauling 80,000 pounds in other states has 17,000 pounds of weight on most of its axles. The argument is that the big rigs with the lower axle weight do only 62 percent as much damage as the smaller rigs with fewer axles.

A second argument is that road damage also is determined by weather cycles, quality of construction, quality of materials and volumes of traffic.

A third argument at M-DOT is that if Michigan lowered truck weight limits to 80,000 pounds, the work presently done by 9,500 trucks would have to be done by 15,000 trucks. Truck companies would have to buy more rigs, hire more drivers, spend more on gasoline and expand terminals, loading docks and repair facilities.

Finally, it is said that Michigan is a transportation backwater off the major cross-country routes. With poor rail service, we would have to pay much higher prices for goods if it weren't for big trucks.

IT DOESN'T ring true. On paper, M-DOT's arguments appear to have been prepared by experts whom we should trust and honor. But I have the nagging suspicion it is sophistry.

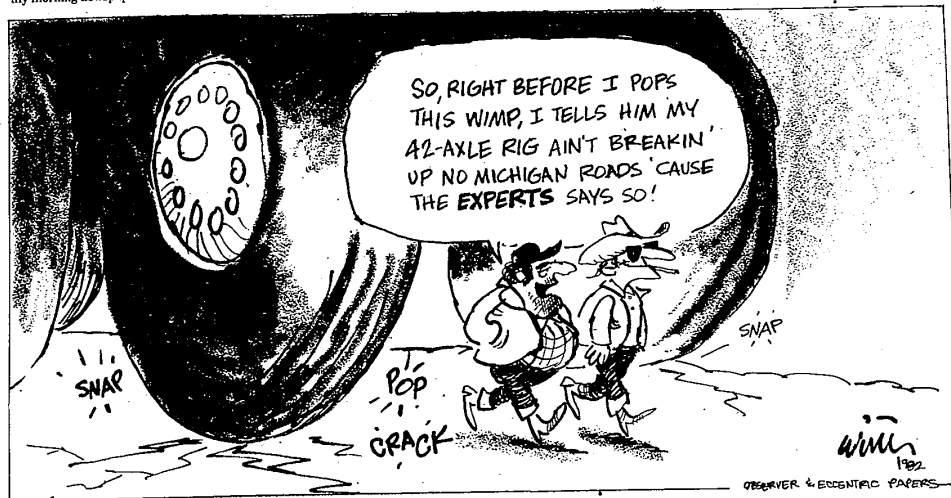
John Gruba, managing director of the Oakland County Road Commission, has the same nagging doubts about the technical reports.

Gov. William G. Milliken is seeking a 0.7-percent increase in the state personal income tax, a hike of about 15 percent. He would earmark 0.3 percent for highways.

Milliken also is asking that truck license fees be increased 85 percent. You didn't hear that in his March 10 radio address. I found it tucked away in the technical material he submitted to the Legislature.

What the governor is saying is that if big trucks are going to continue to pound the roads, they are darn well going to pay for it.

I have a strong hunch Milliken is on the right track.



Despite recession, assessments soar

It's rare that one story dominates all newspapers in the Observer & Eccentric group. But such was the case last week.

Boards of review convened to listen to homeowners' complaints about property assessments. And homeowners in record numbers let their local government officials know what they thought of their assessments.

"We're in a depressed economy, and my assessment has gone up every year in the past four years," said a man in Livonia. A West Bloomfield man said, "I make a good living. I love this country. I lived in Europe nine years, and it's better here. But lies are lies. My house did not go up 5 percent in value."

From Troy came the complaint: "The real estate market in '81 is not what it was in '78, '79 or even '80. I can't get from my home what I would have gotten last year. We have not sold a home in my subdivision."

A man from Redford said he almost had a heart attack when he saw his \$2,480 tax bill. "I have been in my house since 1952, and I never complained before," he said.

Volunteers sit on boards of review. Once a year they hear complaints from property owners who are dissatisfied with assessments. These assessments are the basis for the property taxes later paid



Nick
Sharkey

by the homeowner.

WHY THE INCREASED anger this year?

Obviously, the economy has much to do with it. Many more persons are unemployed this year than last year. Others have had their salaries reduced. They can't afford more taxes.

But just as importantly, people are not buying homes today. Because of unemployment and high interest rates, many potential home buyers are out of the market. It's hard for a homeowner to see his assessment raised when he knows he has little chance of selling his home.

Troy Assessor Ernest Reschke has heard of some houses selling \$20,000 to \$50,000 below the original asking price. If property assessments are going up at the same time, you can understand the anger.

In addition, a new state law went into effect this year. Public Act 114 requires that factors used to

equalize tax assessment at 50 percent of market value be applied by class of property — residential, commercial, industrial and agricultural.

Before, all the property in a community was lumped together and a factor applied. This new law has had the effect of lifting the tax burden off businesses at the homeowners' expense.

THIS COMBINATION of factors has swamped local boards of review.

They report record numbers of appeals. For example, Plymouth, which usually has 20-30 appeals, had 150 after its first two days of a four-day session.

It has not been easy for those who have volunteered to serve on the boards. As Julie Ball of Livonia said after listening to a widow with three children, "It's not hard to relate to the situation, but for the grace of God it could be any one of us."

If this is not a tax revolt, it is a rebellion. What's happening at our suburban boards of review tells us volumes about the disposition of local taxpayers.

Smart politicians are watching carefully. Taxpayers just are not willing to give any more. Are you listening, Gov. Milliken?

The alternative to levying more taxes is to make additional cuts in government budgets. It looks like we can expect more cuts.

When charity stopped at the Olympia

It's fascinating how current events link themselves with the past.

No sooner had The Stroller heard the news that the Norris family would dispose of the Detroit Red Wings, ending an era in hockey circles, than his thoughts went back to an afternoon in 1935. It was his first business meeting with the late James Norris, the grain king who had taken over the franchise and Olympia Stadium.

At the time, The Stroller was head of the sports department of the Detroit Free Press and was overseer of the Golden Gloves tournament, one of the paper's best promotions.

Things had gone along smoothly until some mothers complained it was a shame the paper needed money so badly that their sons' blood had to be spilled to get it.

There was a quick meeting of the editors to devise some means of combatting the criticism. At this point, The Stroller suggested it might be well if the paper announced it would turn the receipts over to charity. The idea was accepted, and it was left to The Stroller to set up the charity plan.

THE FIRST THOUGHT that came to his mind was to contact Jim Norris at Olympia and ask for a reduction in the fee. He figured the great grain king would go along and cut back the fee of 15 percent of gross receipts.



the stroller

W.W. Edgar

Any sort of reduction in the rental of the Olympia would have been wonderful because the Golden Gloves always drew a capacity crowd.

One afternoon, The Stroller sat across from Norris and asked for a reduction in the rent as a charitable move, hoping the idea would be readily accepted.

Norris listened attentively. Then he said, "We don't get anything for nothing in my paper. You folks show no charity to the Olympia. So why not continue on a business basis? You pay your bills, and we will pay yours."

The Stroller was almost speechless. Then he countered, "I'll sign the contract as it is, but I'd like to tell you something. If you figured you are not getting anything for nothing in our paper, starting today we will have no full-time hockey writer. We

will confirm the rumor that the Red Wings are going to play on the morning of the game, and there will be ample coverage of the contest. But that will be all."

The young sports editor felt rather brave in talking up to the multimillionaire and walked out of the office. But as he was leaving, Norris spoke up: "I have no objection to your thought. If that is all you think our team is worth, that's your business."

FINE. HOCKEY news was cut down — for a while.

Then something happened. The Wings started moving down opponents and easily made the playoffs.

What was more, they won the Stanley Cup, emblematic of the championship. The town went crazy in celebration. The Wings became the biggest news story of the day with headlines not only on the sports pages but the front pages as well.

You can imagine how The Stroller felt on the night Norris was given the Stanley Cup, and he walked past with a wink in his eye.

Never has The Stroller felt so embarrassed. And no matter whether the Norris family cuts all ties with Detroit, he never will forget the first meeting with the head of the family who started the Norris Era in hockey.