

Tales of con games and powder rooms

THEY TALK. I listen. Not that I'm nosy, understand. I'm not. It's just that if people insist on revealing themselves in the stories they tell, then I'm willing to hear them out.

Visitors' conversations, especially the what-did-you-do-with-your-weekend type, have brightened many a morning within these dingy yellow walls. Listen in on a couple of recently told tales.

A WOMAN who was in a fancy restaurant told of a con game which one brash fellow so skillfully pulled off there recently.

Seems this man entered the place, identified himself as a representative of another name eatery and asked to see the owner.

The man told the owner that he planned to dine



Tom Baer

there with friends later that night. The two of them, owner and potential customer, sat at the bar for some time, looking over the menu and the wine list.

Finally, the man asked if he could buy the owner a drink. The owner declined, saying he had to get back to work. As the owner got up to leave, the man ordered a Coke and then discovered he had no money.

While he was walking away, the owner called back to say the Coke was on the house. The man responded by calling over the bartender and saying, "Mr. _____ (the owner) said to give me \$100."

The startled bartender looked at the owner, who by now was across the room. The owner gave an affirmative nod, thinking he had approved a free soft drink.

The man then left the restaurant — \$100 richer.

"He joked with us as he was leaving," my friend said. "He said, 'Goodbye, ladies. Have a good night.'"

ANOTHER MORNING. Another woman. Another restaurant story. This time our lady was dining at the Machus Red

Fox, which is where labor leader Jimmy Hoffa was last seen alive.

After the meal, our lady went downstairs to use the facility. She was confronted by two choices, one marked "Gentlemen," the other "Powder room."

"So maybe I had a little too much wine," our lady said, "but I was uncertain about which one to go into. I mean, there's a lot of confusion about sex roles today."

"I thought that maybe a place as posh as Machus would have a special bathroom for men."

So what did she do? "This is what I did: I peeked into the powder room and saw a bunch of flowery wallpaper. Then I knew it was for the women."

By the way, our lady, who dined on filet mignon, said the lobster dinner cost \$28.

Better schools will cost people time and money

TWO MONTHS ago I wrote a column on "A Nation at Risk."

That was the report written on the nation's educational system by an 18-member panel commissioned by the federal government. Among other things, it said schools in the United States were threatened by a "rising tide of mediocrity."

The report declared that scores on standardized tests given high school students have dropped consistently over a 20-year period. It noted that the average school year in this country is 180 days vs. 250 in Japan. It said most school children in the United States attend classes for six hours a day vs. eight hours in most of the world.

In that column, I complained that the report would gather dust in the offices of most suburban school districts. From the stories published in our newspapers, it appeared that local districts were doing little to respond to the scathing indictment.

I'M HAPPY to say that since then I have noticed some improvements. Good examples:

- The Wayne-Westland School District studied the report and issued its recommendations. Wayne-Westland will continue making curriculum changes and is now writing five- and 10-year plans for the district.

- Schoolcraft College will increase the number of students in its Learning Assistance Center by 30 percent during the next academic year. This center teaches incoming college students basic academic skills needed to succeed in college.

- Southfield's Dr. Yvonne Walker was among the first in this country to earn a master teacher certificate, a classification recommended in "A Nation at Risk" for teachers of special merit. She received it this summer from Wayne State University.

- Bloomfield Hills started a commission to evaluate "A Nation at Risk." It appointed a former principal to spend 20 hours per week coordinating the work of the commission.



Nick Sharkey

WHILE IT'S ENCOURAGING to see some activity on "A Nation at Risk," I still suspect it will have little effect in most school districts.

Our schools will not improve until education becomes important to everyone. It will take a commitment of time and money to turn our schools around.

As Gerald Boston, Southfield school board president, says, "The different elements that make up the educational community — all citizens — must agree that education is a priority. That hasn't happened since 1958 when Sputnik was launched."

Schools must be in session longer than 180 days. Children must attend classes for more than six hours a day. Science, mathematics and foreign language studies must be emphasized. That will mean more tax money for schools.

The state must raise academic requirements. Although the state mandates many programs from hot lunches to special education classes, the only graduation requirement is a half-year classroom instruction in U.S. government.

Local businesses must send employees into the schools to teach science or calculus and tell students how their studies will translate into jobs. All parents, not just those with axes to grind, must become involved in their local schools. They should demand that the flaws outlined in "A Nation at Risk" be solved.

Like motherhood and the flag, it's easy to favor better education. It's different when we are required to commit time and money.

But we'd better start now before it's too late.



Merit pay opens box of troubles

GIVING MERIT pay to exemplary teachers is like putting new tires on a car that has a faulty transmission and windows that won't roll up.

Yet the idea is being pushed as a panacea to the nation's educational ills. Let's not kill ourselves; merit pay does not begin to address the failures of public education. At best, it touches upon rewarding teachers for going the extra mile.

Everyone agrees that children are a precious resource and, in an ideal world, deserve the best teachers that money can buy. But despite the fact that college graduates are turning their backs on teaching in order to pursue more financially rewarding jobs in the business world, there are a couple of factors that serve to hold down teacher salaries.

One is that in an age of declining school enrollments, demand for teachers is far outweighed by the supply.

The other is that teachers are essentially seasonal workers. The average teacher puts in about 180 days in front of a class. The figures I have read place the average number of days for a non-teaching worker at more than 240.

A solution that might solve the teacher pay issue and upgrade our curriculums is to expand the school year to year-round. The idea of summers off for students found its roots in an agrarian society. Now that American children no longer have to help with the crops, they should be spending more time in the classroom.

More teaching time would justify salaries that are comparable to those earned in industry and could be justified by increasing the amount of materials taught.

BUT YOU CAN BET that lengthening the school



Marilyn Fitchett

year is something that will find a lot of opposition — beginning at the bargaining table.

It's predictable that unions would expect to have a say in lengthening the school calendar. And it's the role of the union that conflicts with the idea of merit pay. Union structure rules the professional lives of teachers. Unions tend to lump all employees — good, bad or indifferent — into a single category, namely seniority, and demand that all be paid accordingly.

School districts have the option of evaluating teachers during their non-tenured years, but once a teacher receives tenure, there is little a district can do to either reward or remove a unionized teacher.

LABOR CONTRACTS aside, merit pay has an iffy future. It is an issue which raises more questions than provides solutions.

For instance: Who sets the criteria for merit — the state Department of Education or the local district?

- How do you determine successful performance — test results? What about the teacher who "teaches to the test?"

- Is popularity to be a criterion? It's known kids tend to like younger teachers with whom they feel more comfortable. Will this result in age bias?

- What children will benefit from having these teachers? Will it be the gifted student, the slow student or the average student?

- To what lengths will parents go to assure their children will have these special teachers?

- What will be the effect on those who don't rate merit pay? What kind of morale problems will develop on a teaching staff?

If educational leaders are able to sort out the merit pay issue, they will find they haven't touched on much of a solution to what ails America's public schools. Merit pay is a Band-Aid remedy for a patient that requires major rehabilitation.

Dozen saved in unexciting, true story

IN THE old detective radio programs, Sherlock Holmes or Mr. and Mrs. North would publicly entrap the killer at the show's end.

In modern movies, the killer is dispatched to the netherworld in a blazing shootout.

In Oakland County's real life, the conclusion is less dramatic. Yet by pointing the finger at a killer, 12 lives have been saved.

We know this, not because a spectacular plot was foiled by a daring raid on a warehouse hideaway, but by subtracting 49 from 61.

IN THE FIRST six months of last year, 61 persons were killed in Oakland County traffic. In the first six months of this year, 49 have been killed. That is a reduction of 12 deaths — a 20 percent drop.

The apparent reason, according to the Traffic Improvement Association (TIA) of Oakland County, is the countywide drunk driving program.

That is the program whereby law enforcement agencies targeted certain roads and times of the week where they were most apt to find drunk drivers — Woodward and Telegraph roads, for example. Then they let it be known they would patrol those areas with cars and Breathalyzer. And then they set up shop and cracked down on drunk driving.

"We're convinced that most of the reduction is due to the countywide drunk driving program," said Bruce Madsen, TIA managing director. "Compared to last year, our alcohol-related fatalities are down 32 percent."

It would be pretty tough to make a "Cagney and Lacey" yarn out of that. But the persons whose lives were saved would fill half a classroom, and the dollar savings and misery avoided are incalculable.



Tim Richard

THERE ARE other reasons fewer persons are being killed and maimed on Oakland's roads, TIA reported. They are even less exciting.

More people are using seat belts, it seems. Even a 25 mph crash can be fatal if you are thrown out of the car and bash your skull on the pavement.

Vehicles are being engineered more safely. Remember that the next time you hear someone berate "federal regulations."

Roads and intersections are being improved to make them safer. The Oakland County Road Commission has done yeoman work here for several years and has more changes on the drawing boards. Intersection are being widened with turning lanes. Traffic signals are being computerized to allow turning motions on delayed signals. Shoulders are being improved.

Emergency medical services are being improved. Not very sexy stuff, is it? Clint Eastwood wouldn't touch TIA's script with a 30-foot pole.

FOLK WISDOM holds that government does only two things well: wage war and inflate the economy. Not so.

The crackdown on drunk driving took a lot of coordinated governmental effort — the sheriff's department, local police, prosecutors, judges.

The Michigan Legislature played its role with its loud, attention-getting debate over increasing penalties for drunk driving.

TIA and the businesses which help fund it get a pat on the back for cooperating with and prodding government.

Maybe we in the newspaper business who spread the word on such unglamorous goings-on should get a smidgen of the credit.

Twelve lives saved in six months. A terrific story, even if it wasn't good for the box office.