

# Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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## **BEAR** by Elaine Ferrara

During breakfast, I search the National Forestry maps for vehicle access to trails leading to lakes or streams where I might record tree frogs. All night long, these tiny little creatures, not much bigger than a quarter, sing symphonies of melodies.

At 10 a.m., I am ready for my frog exploration trip: granola with diced, dried fruit; water; notebook; hiking boots; green-and-white checkerboard lawn chair and thermometer. The thermometer is the most important piece of equipment, used to make sure the water was warm enough for the breeding and subsequent singing of the frogs.

After traveling almost two miles on foot alongside a cliff, I am startled by an eight-foot-tall black bear, who jumps down off the cliff 20 feet in front of me. The bear stands tall, facing me.

My immense fear, which I've encountered several times in my veterinary practice when challenged by an angry patient, stimulates dozens

of appropriate messages. The messages are based on my understanding about behavioral traits in territorial, carnivorous animals:

1. Don't look in the eyes. Looking at the perpetrator's eyes presents a challenge.
2. What sex is the bear? Females are generally less aggressive, unless they are accompanied by young. A thought strikes: "She's a female, and no babies!"
3. Calm down. Stay calm.
4. At all costs, stay still, keep your eyes still. Movement can present a threat or invite a chase, both of which are dangerously life-threatening. I am prepared to stand still, for eternity, if necessary.
5. Observe the bear's posture. She's standing tall, waiting for my response to her threat.
6. Look for solutions to the current situation.

There is only one solution. I move the lawn chair from under my arm, in infinitesimally small distances, over a

20-minute period, to cover the front of my torso. When I get done, the bear receives my thought, straightens her body some more with a look of concern as if wondering, "What's going on behind that thing?" Then she seems confused about her choices for the next move.

To my great surprise, the bear, leaping to her right, flies down the side of the mountain over the rhododendron bushes *without cracking a branch!*

West Virginians tell me that she probably didn't fly, that the rhododendrons are really that tough.

Watching her flight, I realized that her skin was flapping side-to-side under her very thin body. Indeed, I was intended as a meal!

Funny, those National Forestry people never said anything about bears.

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## **COWGIRL SONG** by David Cuff

I met them at a jamboree  
Till then I was wild and free  
They both staked a claim on my heart  
I could tell by their songs . . .  
They were miles apart

Clyde sang about trucks and  
thunderin' trains  
Bart sang of trees and summer rains  
They wanted me right from the start  
Though I loved them both . . .  
They were miles apart

Clyde had hits that made him a star  
He bought me clothes and a brand  
new car  
The local road house was enough for  
Bart  
Just like their songs . . .  
They were miles apart

They knew I would have to choose  
One would win, and one would lose  
Would it be Clyde or would it be  
Bart?  
I loved them both . . .  
And it tore me apart

How could I give just one my love?  
I talked to them and the good Lord  
above  
Then flew to Alaska to make a fresh  
start  
I can still hear their songs . . .  
But we're miles apart

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## **GETTING THE HANG OF IT** by George Kurz

"Would you teach me to water-ski this year, Grandpa?" five-year-old Rebecca asked. The previous summer, she had had to stay on the sidelines while I taught her sister Sarah, then seven. Rebecca had just watched Sarah take

off successfully. On her very first try of the summer, she stayed on skis far out from shore and around the cove called City Bay in the northern part of Lake Champlain. “My mom thinks I’m not strong enough and my feet aren’t big enough to fit in the skis,” she continued.

“Well, you’re only five, Becca, and it is really up to your mom and dad,” I explained. Although I felt strongly that she could do it, I kept that feeling to myself. “They do let you snow-ski, don’t they?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Cross country?”

“Yes. And downhill too!”

I knew full well about Rebecca’s determination to do just about anything her older sister could do. She had amazed me a year and a half earlier when she learned to ride a two-wheeler bicycle with no training wheels at age four. She proudly commented then, “I’m only four years old, and I’m getting the hang of it!”

At breakfast the next morning, Steve, Rebecca’s father, asked me, “Do you think Becca is big enough to try water-skiing?”

“I don’t know, Steve,” I responded. “It’s up to you and Barb.” But I knew that was the first sign that Rebecca’s eagerness to do it was getting through to her parents.

That afternoon, conditions were perfect—hardly a ripple on the water. Steve and Barb relented. With Steve driving the speedboat, I stood in the shallow water by the beach with Rebecca and helped her get the junior skis on.

“Show me the signals, Becca,” I asked. “What’s ‘faster?’” Her right thumb shot up. “How about ‘slower?’” She pointed her thumb down. “‘Cut?’” Her hand motioned a slash across the throat.

“Great! Now bend your knees way down and pretend you’re sitting on the back of the skis,” I told her. I helped her out into deeper water and positioned the tips of the skis just out of the water, straddling the towrope. I told Rebecca, “Let me see you make your elbows straight. Terrific! Now keep the elbows straight the whole time, even if you feel like bending them. And keep your knees bent as long as you can—till you’re actually skiing on the water.”

Steve pulled the boat forward until the towrope was tight. I held Becca and the skis in position, practically on the surface of the water, and told her, “Yell, ‘Hit it!’ whenever you’re ready.”

“Hit it!” she yelled, after but a moment’s hesitation. The boat lunged forward, but within six feet, Rebecca fell in the water.

“Good try, Becca!” I exclaimed. Steve

circled back toward the beach. Barb yelled, “Do you want to try again?”

“Of course!” Rebecca responded immediately. During four more attempts in which the most she stayed on the skis was 15 or 20 feet, she showed not the slightest sign of discouragement. On the sixth attempt, a breakthrough occurred. She got up and stayed up for a good 75 yards.

“You did it, Becca!” everyone shouted. “I think you’re getting the hang of it,” I said, as she prepared for another ride.

“I’ve GOT the hang of it, Grandpa!” she replied. It never crossed her mind that she might fail.

The next day, conditions again were ideal. “Tell me the rules again, Grandpa,” Rebecca asked me after I had helped her get the skis on. She seemed convinced that if she just followed all the instructions, success would be hers. That day, she stayed up for a large semi-circle, halfway around the cove.

On the final day at the lake, Rebecca skied about two miles. Not only was Rebecca the youngest person I had ever taught to water-ski, but I let her know, “Becca, I’ve never seen or even heard of anyone five years old water-skiing before!” Teaching her was the high point of our vacation in Vermont—a moment to remember.

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## STORIES FROM THE GOLDEN VALLEY

by Kathy Hoff

My dad grew up in Pomeroy, a two-street village tucked between rolling hills in eastern Washington state. The two streets paralleled the east-west railroad tracks which took you east to Pataha or west to Dodge. Trains stopped in Pomeroy to pick up the one local export—wheat. The trains came and went with the wheat, but most of the folks of Pomeroy stayed right there between the golden hills—producing the wheat directly or providing support services. My dad’s father was a wheat buyer.

Life in Pomeroy, as it comes down to me from my dad’s stories, was simple and, except for the railroad, almost pre-industrial. Folks grew the wheat, went to church, kept a garden patch, had a coop of chickens in the back yard and a horse or two in the barn. Boys went to school and got into Tom Sawyerish kinds of mischief—they tipped over outhouses and the like. Once, fooling around with his buddies, my dad fell out of the haymow in the family barn while his mother was hosting a Ladies’ Aid Society meeting in their parlor. He landed across a manger on his stomach and was carried into the parlor, limp and barely breathing, to the horror of the assembled ladies. One winter, he bit almost through his tongue when his homemade sled hit a bump. He also

damaged his tongue taking a dare to stick it against the pipe railing on the bridge over the creek one freezing winter day. In warmer weather, he'd walk on the rail, balancing above the creek like a tight-rope walker. His sister would tell on him, and he'd get a licking at home. But even with the licking, it would always be worth testing out his boyish skills and daring.

The Great War took place well beyond the sheltering Pomeroy hills when my dad, born in 1907, was ten and eleven. His young soldier-uncle Fred died in France with the U.S. Expeditionary Forces—not of shells or mustard gas, but of pneumonia developing from flu—part of the great Spanish flu epidemic, which, along with the war, ravaged the world in 1918-19.

The story Dad told most often about the war period, though, was not about Uncle Fred or even about the flu; it was about knitting. To stimulate patriotism and make schoolchildren feel part of the war effort, Dad's grade-school teacher assigned her students the task of knitting afghan squares. Put together, the squares would warm some poor soldier or refugee in France or Belgium. Concerned as he might (or might not) have been about the plight of trench-mired soldiers or frost-bitten refugees, my dad balked at knitting afghan squares. As he saw it, knitting wasn't manly. Each day that he refused to knit at school, his teacher spanked

him. Each day that his parents heard (his tattletale sister again) that he wouldn't knit at school, they spanked him at home. At the end of the school year, the teacher went away. My dad's parents took him down to the railroad station to see her off. She took away with her, out into the great world, a farewell present—one very crooked, very grubby afghan square for the war effort that my dad, under strict supervision, had laboriously produced at home.

Another time, my dad and his father saw a cluster of men gathered out back of the railroad station. Father took son along as he went to join the curious. What they saw when they wedged their way into the circle was the bodies of two dead Indians. My dad's father knew the regional Indians through his work as a wheat buyer. He was sympathetic to them and understood what had happened. The two young Indians had gone away to college—rare for anyone in those days, extraordinary for Indians. They had come home. They had found no place at home for educated Indians and had shot themselves in a suicide pact.

That story haunted my own childhood imagination, but even more so the story of the Pomeroy neighbor who, at work, had fallen into a vat of boiling fat being rendered. The unfortunate man was brought home to die, which took him eight agonizing days. People came in to see him, perhaps to pay next-to-last respects, but, more likely,

the story suggests, as spectacle. This was an unusual and frightening event. My dad—unbelievably to me—was taken as a young child to see him. The man's fat-boiled skin, bare to spare him the pain of chafing clothing or bed covers and beginning to rot, was turning blue.

How have the stories wandered from boyhood idyll of innocent mischief and mishap to those gruesome bodies? Why, indeed, would my grandparents have taken their son to see the bodies? My grandparents were, as I remember them, gentle, loving, devoutly religious people. Their lickings would have been for the boy's own good and probably more painful for them to give than for the boy to receive. But the dead Indians and the dying blue man? Maybe it was the religion. Maybe they wanted him to know that even in Pomeroy with its sheltering wheat-golden hills, one walked in the valley of the shadow of death, that there were final mysteries down behind the railroad station and farther along the track going west.

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## AT PENNSWOOD



Hi there! I want to congratulate you on growing old so gracefully!

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## FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL by Robin Meaker

I was six when I started school in England. The usual age was five, but Mother (an American) decided that was still too young, so I started in September 1942.

I remember the coat I wore, a light blue with big white pearl buttons. It was double-breasted and had a belt in the back with two more buttons. I don't remember anything else.

My father took me that day. This was unusual! He was often ill, and when he was working, he traveled all over England. The public bus stop was about

200 yards away and up a steep hill.  
Civilians did not have cars—no petrol.

My school was in Farnham, Surrey, a few miles from Tilford where we lived. It was a very small, private school in a converted townhouse on Castle Street. At the top of Castle Street were the ruins of a castle; it was torn down or burned several hundred years before I saw it.

The bus, #45, stopped on Castle Street, not far from St. George's School (that was its name). It had four classrooms when I started. My first classroom had been the living room. It had French doors that went to a walled garden where we had recess!

British schools were ungraded. You got promoted when the teacher and headmistress decided you were able to do the harder work. Primary school went up to the age of 10½ or 11. Then you took exams (called 11+) to decide on secondary school. Although we were about to move to America, the teachers wanted me to take the 11+ exams to boost their standing; I did and passed.

I have gotten a long ways off track! I don't recall anything about getting home on my first day. Probably, one of my parents took the bus, collected me, and took me home until I learned which was my bus stop. We had

women ticket collectors, and they kept an eye on children going to and from school.

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## **TABULA RASA**

**by John Wood**

Each day the school slate wiped clean.  
Just so, with each rising of the sun  
Comes a second chance,  
A chance the old life to review,  
To scribe on the living slate anew.  
Discard that ill-conceived as waste,  
Rewrite only that held over time  
As true.

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## **BRING HOME THE CASH**

**by Don Abell**

The War was over, but there was still a lot of work to do. The USS General Mitchell was one of many ships assigned to return thousands of troops from the Asian theater of war. The ship was designed to carry 5,500 troops and a crew of 500. Not only did we bring troops home, but we also took many back to take care of some clean-up work in the Pacific Islands.

Prior to the end of conflict, the Japanese had released mines into the ocean. I don't know who determined the number, but it was said to have been 10,000 mines. One of the mines reportedly made its way to San Francisco.

No one had told me about the mines.

While I was on the mid-watch one night, the phone rang on the bridge. It was about two a.m. I answered, "Bridge, aye," and the response was "Bow Watch, mine dead ahead 100 yards." My first thought was "They didn't tell me what to do about this when I was in school." If the 100 yards was right, at our speed of 18.6 knots, we would hit the mine in less than a minute. He then responded, "It's coming down the starboard side." We had been fighting a slight starboard current all night. If we turned the ship, we would broadside the mine. Fortunately I heard the officer on the port deck respond, "It's coming down the port side." I ran out to see it. To my amazement, it was about 10 feet from the hull and spinning like a top. Since there is nothing in the ocean to make a mine with a weight of over a ton spin, we must have hit it. and I don't know why it didn't explode. We did encounter six more mines while crossing the ocean, and we were able either to sink them or explode them with our 40mm anti-aircraft guns.

We eventually arrived at the island of Guam. While we were loading the troops onto the ship, we were assigned to return the leftover cash from the Asian Theater of Operations. The cash was all paper U.S. bills and coins. It was loaded in 146 wooden boxes. Each needed two crewmen to carry it up the gangway. The total amount was supposed to be \$26,526,400 with a weight of 11 tons including the boxes.

The officer in charge was Navy Lt. (jg) Edwin Goddard. He wasn't a member of the Mitchell's crew. As the ship's photographer, I was photographing the loading. The boxes were stored in a room with a steel door. The door was locked and welded shut. Two Marines were stationed as guards next to the door 24 hours a day.

The voyage to San Francisco was 5,072 miles and eight days of travel. After we were in port, the 5,500 troops and the cash were unloaded. To my surprise, I learned that when the cash was recounted, that it was short by some small amount.

In the December 1992/January 1993 issue of *Modern Maturity*, I was surprised to see an article titled "War and Remembrance," which was about the return of the \$26,526,400. It also stated that \$12.23 was missing and that Lt. (jg) Goddard had to pay it out of his own pocket.



We sank or exploded six mines while crossing the ocean.

I had photographed the loading of the cash and included pictures of Lt. Goddard. Although it was now 47 years later, I still had some pictures. I made copies, sent them to *Modern Maturity*, and asked that they forward them to Edwin Goddard. Two weeks later I got a thank-you letter from him at Hollsopple, PA.



The cash was loaded in 146 wooden boxes; each required two crewmen to carry it up the gangway.

I had a lot of experiences on the General Mitchell. You might say that is where I really grew up.

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## **WHAT ARE THE ODDS?**

**by Julie Beers**

When I read in a recent *Village Voices* issue, “Do you have a story that defies the odds?” I thought that surely in my 80-plus years, there might be something, if I could remember it. One recollection surfaced.

At the age of 50, I enrolled in clothing design at the University of Cincinnati’s College of Art,

Architecture, and Planning. It was a demanding five-year co-op program, school/work in alternating semesters. I was very worried about my qualifications. How would I stack up against my 18- or 19-year-old classmates?

The first year was devoted to children’s wear, and the initial assignment was to design and swatch 16 outfits. It seemed a big test of my very presence there. However, when I began, the ideas tumbled out. For hours, I sketched and snipped swatches, losing track of time. The table where I was working sat against a ground-floor window with an uninterrupted view to the west.

Suddenly, and it seemed weirdly appropriate, when I looked out, I found myself eye to eye with—yes—a peacock! His emblematic tail feathers displayed every color.

Never before or after, outside of the zoo, did I ever see another peacock or fathom how he got there. Did he stroll over from some grand estate? Did he fly? I preferred to fancy he came to celebrate with me on that glorious afternoon.

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## LAST WORDS by Gene Carlough

Don't  
cry.  
It  
hurts  
me when you cry.

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## AN OLD-FASHIONED PLEASURE

If you'd like to slow down and savor some interesting ideas clothed in clever words, we've got just the thing. Twice a year, Pennswoodians gather to read (and listen to) bits of poetry and prose. This event (Poetry & Prose) is enthusiastically sponsored by *Village Voices*.

You are cordially invited to be either a reader or a listener.

If you'd like to read, please follow the instructions in the Bulletin to get on the program. April 4 is the last day you can sign up.

If you'd like to be in the audience, put this date on your calendar:

**POETRY & PROSE**  
**7 p.m., Thursday, April 11**  
**Penn Hall**

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