

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

Volume 15 Number 137

October 2021

PENNSWOOD, COMPUTERS, AND THE JOAN OF ARC SYNDROME by Jim McClellan

Pennswood residents generally are not computer savvy. Yes, some are, what with professional experience in industry or academe. Most, like me, muddle through with help from kids or more knowledgeable friends and neighbors. Yet others still arrive at Pennswood without computers or any computer skills whatsoever. The recently established PVRA Helpline, the tech support referral list PVRA published in the *Bulletin*, and that so many of us still have AOL accounts underscore the point that the resident cohort at Pennswood lags behind the rest of the world when it comes to facility with computers and electronic devices. Why would this be the case?

The answer is that when personal computers first came on the scene in the 1980s and even more when smart-phone devices made their appearance in the early 2000s, people now at

Pennswood were already established, mature adults, and the “Joan of Arc Syndrome” explains why for the most part they are deficient in computer skills.

My late colleague, the historian of technology Harold Dorn, coined the term the “Joan of Arc Syndrome” to describe what happens when new technologies come on the scene. His point was that a groundbreaking new technology creates a *generation gap* favoring the young in adopting and being comfortable with technological novelty. Youth generally have more free time and are not wedded to the status quo.

Dorn’s favorite example was that of Joan of Arc (1412 - 1431) and cannon technology. The Maid of Orléans was a 17-year-old peasant girl with hallucinations who came to lead the French army in the 100 Years War and so saved France. How could this be? Dorn’s explanation was that at the time cannon technology was a radically new technology that the old generals, committed to mounted knights and armor, were too stuck in their

ways to understand or master. On the other hand, evidence suggests that Joan, the youngster, had a knack for positioning cannon in battle and so gained a decisive military advantage for the French.

Youth also often leads in creating new technologies as well as adopting them. Bill Gates was 25 and Paul Allen 27 when they founded Microsoft Corporation in 1975. What of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, dropouts from Reed College and Berkeley, who at 20 and 25 founded Apple Computer in 1976 in Jobs' parents' garage? What are we to make of the 20-year-old Mark Zuckerberg, who left Harvard in 2004 at the end of his sophomore year having launched Facebook in his dorm room? These young entrepreneurs did things that GE or Motorola or other mega-electronics companies could not, stuck as they were thinking about knights in armor.

The Joan of Arc Syndrome came home to me personally in the late 1980s when a bunch of us already middle-aged humanities professors wanted to learn about computer programming: we hired a student to teach us the basics of BASIC!

This pattern of youth creating and leading their elders to new technological frontiers is found over and over again. Thomas Edison was 22 when

he received his first patent. Vladimir Zworykin was 23 when he produced the first real television. Eighteenth-century innovations by 29-year-old James Watt and 26-year-old Richard Trevithick gave us the modern steam engine and the railroad locomotive. In 1906, Lee De Forest, then 33, invented the key component for the emerging technology of commercial radio. All were Joans of Arc.

The generation gap in computer competencies is slowly wending its way through the population of Pennswood and soon will be a thing of the past. But even then, new technologies and new youngsters will keep coming and will challenge Pennswoodians in new ways. The other day, for example, a kid who works at Pennswood overheard me and David Cuff puzzling over the cryptocurrency Bitcoin. The kid pulled out his smartphone, called up his Robinhood account, and waxed poetic about the Dogecoin he purchased at 7 cents a share that was worth 29 cents at that particular moment! *Plus ça change*



THE DOCTOR'S BOATHOUSE by Norval Reece

I grew up in a small town in Indiana, so marrying Ann Benson from Salem, Massachusetts, who spent her sum-

mers on Cape Cod racing sailboats introduced some new experiences. One was being invited to The Doctor's Boathouse.

It was across the salt marsh, over a small tidal creek, and two hundred yards down the shore from my in-laws' summer house.

The Doctor's Boathouse was a rambling one-room wooden structure that all the local children considered to be full of mystery, treasures, and answers to all their questions.

Dr. Horatio Rogers, the owner of this wonderful place, was gruff in manner with a heart of gold. His Boathouse was full of duck decoys, fishing gear, eel pots, sketches of big fish he'd caught, all the best tools for fixing boats, fishing tackle, broken toys, and almost anything.

But the Doctor had certain rules: 1) you had to be invited to enter the Doctor's Boathouse; 2) if you were really special, the Doctor would let you borrow a much-needed tool; 3) what you borrowed had to be returned in better condition than it was when you borrowed it.

Dr. Rogers was a daily fishing buddy of Ann's father, George Benson. And he became a Boathouse buddy of mine.

I was an occasional freshwater fisherman but eager to learn about saltwater fishing, so Dr. Rogers welcomed me to his Boathouse. And later when I asked if I could learn about eeling, that sealed the deal. Eeling was part art and part science in knowing how to properly trap, clean, and smoke eels. Dr. Rogers and my father-in-law prided themselves on being some of the last on Cape Cod who were expert at the process. Their smoked eel served at cocktail parties was prized by the cognoscenti, and they were pleased to be passing their expertise on to the next generation.

So I became a junior partner in The Doctor's Boathouse's mysterious nautical world of fishing and eeling. I stopped over often to use the band saw to make hickory chips for the smoker, to use the "cold smoker" mounted on the pier for my eels and bluefish, and to get reports on where the striped bass were running offshore.

Dr. Rogers has been gone now for many years, but his Boathouse rules have stayed with me. I have found them to be rather good rules for proper stewardship of much that we enjoy in life—whether it's our own "boathouses," the neighborhood, or the planet itself.



DOCTOR Z, IS THAT YOU?

by Howard Arons

I was about ten years old when I read a book about the discovery of some of the chemical elements and the scientists involved. I reread that book several times during the next months, because it captured my imagination like no other reading I had ever done. *Treasure Island, Ivanhoe, Batman and Robin*—all faded away. The appeal of chemistry proved to be quite durable, even when I was in my teens.

When I was fourteen, I went with my Dad on an extended business trip to “the North,” a mysterious place for a native Texan back then. Our first stop was in St. Louis at a manufacturer of industrial and consumer coatings. My father had a day-long series of meetings arranged, and I spent the time visiting the factory laboratory. My host was the chief chemist, who was amiable and patient as I bombarded him with a thousand questions about lab operations.

As an extra treat, my host arranged for me to meet a friend of his, a Dr. Ferdinand Zienty, a senior chemist at Monsanto, just across the river in East St. Louis. We toured Dr Zienty’s lab, and we discussed the projects he was working on, the specialized equipment he was using, and careers in industrial versus academic chemistry, as well as my own interests. It was the

kind of discussion that a nerdy fourteen-year-old kid rarely had. Dr. Zienty and I exchanged letters for about a year after that visit. He sent me reprints of his publications, wrote to me about his successes and blind alleys, and I answered with my own ideas on problems that interested me.

I was certain that my college career would be in chemistry, and after I graduated from high school, I was off to Rice Institute (now Rice University) in Houston to pursue my dream. Graduate school and a Ph.D. followed. My visit with Dr. Zienty 15-odd years before was a distant memory when I took a job with Monsanto in their Central R&D lab outside St. Louis.

A feature of professional life at Monsanto R&D was the monthly review, when groups of scientists reviewed their work in seminar style. During one of those meetings, I was glancing over the audience and saw a man who seemed familiar. During our dinner break, I saw him again, in a group of other visitors. Determined to find out who he was, I walked up to the group. As I joined them, I recognized my old mentor Dr. Zienty, and he recognized me as well. We had a warm and noisy reunion. He was certainly older and grayer, but still quietly serious, with the same glint of good humor in his eyes. After the meeting ended, we went to a nearby spot and (over a beer

or two) caught up with each other's history. It was a wonderful and sentimental moment for two colleagues—one at the beginning of his career and the other nearing retirement. We kept in contact for another two years or so until Ferd retired and I left Monsanto for a new opportunity in Chicago.

I am awed at how a busy man's kindness to an overeager teenage kid that day in East St. Louis shaped my life.



“ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE”

by **Kathy Hoff**

*You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
And latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between*
Johnny Mercer (1944)

Among my many teachers, kindergarten through graduate school, one stands out—my junior-year high-school English teacher, Miss Norma K. Regan. Teachers, even august graduate school professors, were ordinarily *Miss* or *Mr.*—Miss Gunder-son, Miss Clark, Mr. McGill. That even in high school we knew not only Miss Regan's first name, but her middle initial as well indicates that she was not ordinary. On her communications, she would sign that entire name

in large dramatic script. She was flamboyant. And she demanded more of us than we thought we could deliver, and she got that more out of us by the sheer intimidating force of her presence. ““Accentuate the positive/ Eliminate the negative,”” she would exhort, quoting the popular song when her hard-pressed students would balk.

Miss Regan, as we, of course, called her publicly, was as flamboyant in person as she was in signature. Unlike her female colleagues with their short, often graying, permed curls, she had raven-black hair pulled back severely into a bun at the nape of her neck. She had a white-complexioned classic oval face with a slash of bright lipstick across it—not pretty, but striking with a prominent nose and intense gaze. One didn't think as much about her looks, though, as about the force of her personality. She commanded the stage immediately upon entry. She wore a dramatic cloak that she would fling off as she arrived. In junior English, the class fell silent as soon as she took up her position behind the desk—and we were not normally a silent bunch. After the fact, I can see that in a decade, the 1950s, feminist historians have characterized as repressive to women, Miss Regan was a completely self-possessed and self-confident woman.

Our curriculum, as I recall it, makes little sense because of its randomness. We certainly read some early nineteenth-century essayists, because two of my classmates took to calling each other Quiller and Couch. We read *Cyrano de Bergerac*. A friend with an unusually large nose was extremely sensitive about that reading. We read *Ethan Frome*, my first assignment ever when I went beyond the assigned pages to read the whole novella. What I remember most vividly is the year's required Shakespeare reading: *Macbeth*. The memorable part was having to memorize a substantial passage and recite it solo in front of the class, one after another of us, quavering with insecurity as Miss Regan boomed, "Enunciate!" That elocutionary requirement illustrates the "more" she demanded of us despite our conviction we couldn't do it.

Besides teaching classroom English sections, Miss Regan coached the annual public speaking contest and directed regular assembly programs. Mandating *Macbeth* memorizing reflected her passion for getting students to "perform." "Enunciate!" was a favorite exhortation along with "Accentuate the positive!" I had encountered "Enunciate!" early in my high school career. For some reason, despite typical teen anxieties about high school on top of personal shyness, I entered the school speaking contest. We memorized famous

speeches and declaimed them before the assembled student body. Freshman year, I did Franklin Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech and came in second to a golden-tongued classmate whose father was a locally well-known golden-tongued radio announcer. The loss bothered me much less than the process. Because I was so short, Miss Regan decided that the podium made me look like a pumpkin on a shelf, so I had to stand, totally exposed, alongside the podium. She also mandated the particular homemade dress I was to costume myself in for the performance—not a favorite or fashionable outfit. Terrifying and humiliating as the whole experience was at the time, Miss Regan made me do something that made later public speaking and a career demanding it possible.

By my senior year, she was demanding more. For assemblies, she added to the annual speaking contest other readings and group, then solo singing. Despite all her demands—probably *because* of all her demands—I loved Miss Regan for pushing me beyond my capabilities.

Years after I had graduated and she had retired, I took my husband Roger and my sons, then seventeen and fourteen, to visit Miss Regan in her elegant home. Pridefully, I took along to show her some poems the younger boy had written. Well into her eighties

then, she hadn't changed from the commanding presence I remembered. She made the abashed boy stand—upright, good posture, deep breaths—and read his poems aloud to her. Ben was mortified as she thundered, what else, “Enunciate!” The older boy she exhorted to apply to her alma mater, Cornell, but to qualify, she advised him, he would need to spend a year at “a good preparatory school, like Andover.” Then a senior at The Lawrenceville School, he was offended by that.

None of the men in my family cared for bossy, as they saw her, Norma K. Regan, but I was thrilled to see her again. Of all the teachers I studied with over the years, she probably had the greatest influence. She made me stronger than she had found me. After her coaching I never had problems with public speaking, and I did things in my own teaching that I never would have undertaken without her. I did a January college course for several years in which my students developed plays based on children's literature that they then performed in local elementary schools. I played the roles they delighted in assigning me in their dramas—sheep and dwarf and little kid. I had Play Days in my Introduction to Shakespeare classes where students who insisted they could never act in a scene did and loved it.

I learned from Miss Regan that if you demand of your students more than they themselves believe they can do—then they do it.



EDUCATING GRANDPA **by George H. Kurz**

In June 1992, I invited our six-year-old grandson James to go strawberry picking just with me. James and I set out on a sunny Saturday morning from his home and drove about 20 minutes to the Whistle Stop Nursery in Ringoes.

At the nursery's store, I purchased a cardboard container for each of us and got directions to the strawberry fields. We drove as far as we could over bumpy dirt lanes usually traveled by tractors. Here and there our tires splashed a puddle of muddy water left by rains of previous days. We reached the spot to which we had been directed and parked. We then walked about 150 yards to where strawberries awaited us. On the way we encountered a gully partly filled with water separating two fields. For me it was a big step. James required my assistance to jump from one dry side to the other.

We selected a large section of the strawberry field away from other pickers. It had an abundance of deli-

scious-looking red berries. Some were in plain view; others required searching among the leaves. Initially I guided James a bit. “No. That one’s not ripe enough. Just pick the ones that are really red, James.” He got the hang of it in short order. I told him how to avoid berries that were over-ripe.

In less than an hour, James had his container full, and my larger container was nearly full. We were both hot and sweaty by this time, and James was quite ready when I said, “I think it’s about time to head back.”

We trudged back across the fields toward my car. At the gully, I put down my box, gave James a hand as he jumped across, and then went back for my berries.

James was a few feet ahead of me, proudly carrying the fruits of his labor along the rough muddy tractor lane. All of a sudden, his right foot sank into a mud hole, disappearing nearly halfway to the knee, and stuck there. When he tried to yank his foot out, the high-topped sneaker stayed behind in the mud. “Oh shit!” he exclaimed, looking down at his right foot with only a sock. “What am I going to do now? Can you carry me, Grandpa?”

Despite this unfortunate turn of events, James had not lost a single strawberry. “Just stay right there, James,” I instructed. “I’ll be there in a

second and get your strawberries.” Then, with a container of berries in each hand, I headed for the car and left him standing there balancing on one foot.

“Where are you going, Grandpa?” he shouted after me.

“I’m just going to put these in the car and then I’ll come back and help you,” I replied, although how to deal with this mess was by no means clear to me.

“Hurry, Grandpa! I can’t stand here on one foot much longer, and I don’t want to put my sock down in the mud too!” he said, fighting back tears.

“I’m coming as fast as I can, James,” I assured him. “Just try to stand still.” From the car it was only about 50 yards back to him, but to James it must have seemed like forever. I picked him up, carried him to the car, and sat him on the front seat. I returned to the spot of the mishap, retrieved the sneaker from the mud hole, and brought it to the car. It was an absolute mess! As we drove back to the store, James was visibly shaken. What would his Mom say? A thought occurred to me, and I said to James, “Let’s see if they have a place back at the store where we can wash the sneaker.”

Sure enough, the lady in the store directed us to a spigot and hose out on the side of the building. Working

together, we succeeded in getting rid of the gross mud, but our best efforts left us with a sopping wet, previously white sneaker that was now mostly brown.

“I think you better take me straight home, Grandpa,” James requested.

“Well, Oma will be disappointed,” I countered. “You know she is planning lunch for us at our house. Maybe she can help get the sneaker clean.” James still had misgivings but agreed.

On the way back, I decided to share with James an incident from my own childhood. “James, you know, I think you are very fortunate,” I began.

“What do you mean, Grandpa?”

“Well, I think it’s a good thing that you can say something like ‘Oh shit!’ that tells exactly how you are feeling when something really upsetting happens, like with your sneaker this morning.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, not everybody can do that. I remember when I was about eight years old and my mother took me to a country club with some other ladies to play golf. At one point we walked through an area of woods, and suddenly I stepped into a hole that I didn’t see. It was full of water. My leg went in practically up to my knee.

There I was with my pants, my shoe, and my sock soaked, and I didn’t say a word. I just stood there feeling totally embarrassed and stupid, but I couldn’t express how I felt.”

James listened without comment. “So, you see, I think you are lucky to be able to say how bad you felt.”

We were both silent for a while. Then James observed, “I’m the only one in the family that can do that, Grandpa.”

“What do you mean, James?”

“Well, you remember that time last year when my dad was out sailing by himself and got his knee twisted? When he came in, he was in pain and couldn’t even straighten his knee. It was so bad he had to have an operation a few days later. But he was never able to say how bad he felt.”

“Wow, James!” I replied. “I see what you mean.”

Back at our house, Oma scrubbed James’s sneaker and ran it through the washer and dryer. By the time we finished lunch, the sneaker was good as new. The boy and his grandpa had both learned something. When I took James home, his parting comment was, “Grandpa, it really was a very good day.”



WRITING by Alice Warshaw

Writers know exactly where to put the commas, and can spell. Ok. I know that's a myth, but I recognize how blessed I was in college to have had a brilliant roommate who generously corrected my term papers. SHE was a writer!

After graduating, I always paid a neighbor to check punctuation and spelling and to type my term papers. That hid my dyslexia pretty well, and was worth every penny.

Years later I discovered the Word Processor on our home computer. Finally, a machine that politely suggested correct spelling. That was enormously freeing.

In those days it didn't "auto-correct".

Now, when sending messages, you need to reread everything before you tap the send button. You can end up sending "sir Ryan" instead of "sorry," "debited" instead of "delighted," and so on. Some auto-corrections are oddly appropriate, like the time I was projecting a positive vibe, intending to say, "I'm happy to report," and it got changed to "I'm happy to export. . .". I've seen a misspelled "pleased" auto-corrected to "pressed," "Holy moly" to "Holy moldy," "list" to "lust," etc.

You can probably add some pretty funny examples to the *lisp*.

One little typo and the word—uh, —*world* expands in astonishing ways.

I suppose one can turn off auto-correct somewhere in the mistirius in-nirds of a dijital divise, but as a really poor speller, I like living on the egg.



Publication of
**Pennswood Village
Residents Association**

Founder and Editor Emerita:

Paulina Brownie Wilker

Managing Editor: Anne Baber

Contributing Editors:

Glenna Follmer, Kathy Hoff,

Typist: Sarah Pollock

Proofreading: Sally Burkman

Distribution: Lisa Williams

Layout: Henry Baird

Contributors:

All Pennswood Residents

***Email your contributions to
HB@HenryBaird.com
or place typed hard copy
in our open mail box.***

**Past copies of *Village Voices* are
in Pennswood Library, shelf 21.**