

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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LEROY, OHIO

by Jay Chandler

Our Chandler family of four drove for lunch most Sundays from our Lakewood home to my Great-Aunt Mamie's farm in Leroy, Ohio. Leroy was after you drove through Medina and Strongsville and came to a mounded-up grass-covered traffic circle surrounded by little town buildings. Leroy Circle usually had deep tire marks going straight through, from big barreling-along trucks that hadn't dealt with the sudden arrival of a small traffic circle plunked down onto a straight, flat, two-lane country road.

When we drove into Mamie's gravel drive, her dog, Sandy, was always on the side porch wagging his tail and smiling. His upper lip pulled way up so you could see all those white collie teeth and gums. My parents, Peg and Jim, thought a lot of Sandy. Peg said that one Sunday afternoon at Mamie's farm before I was born, she went out looking for little Billy, my brother. Sandy was standing by the fish pond with his head down and

wouldn't come or move when she called. Then she saw that his teeth were clamped on Billy's shirt collar to keep his head above water. Billy was cold and crying when they fished him out. "Almost drowned!" they said.

I was four when Jim bought a Shetland pony for Billy and me. The pony, Susie, was to be kept with the cow, Josephine. Peg said Jim paid five dollars for the pony and that Jim got a hand-tooled western saddle and bridle at Sears for a lot of money, twenty dollars. When Jim got on the saddle to show us how to ride, his toes scraped the dirt. I had to ride Susie almost every Sunday, and I hated that pony! She would toss me into prickler bushes, and I saw sky and then ground and would land hard, crying. When I got up on Susie, I had to keep pulling my legs back because she tried to bite me. Why would anybody pay five dollars for a Shetland pony? Billy could ride and laugh and wave and get his picture taken. I hated him, too. But we were best friends and played Pretend together.

Mamie had a gray and brown car called a Terraplane. It had two long front doors and a door opened out wide from the front. To get in back, you had to be little and squeeze by the front seat—or be Sandy. There was a dusty smell inside and white real ivory knobs from elephants people shot sticking out of the dash panel.

Mamie also had a BIG barn where we would climb way up and jump into the hay mow. Huge clouds of dust rose as we whooped and yelled. (Years later my chest X-rays confirmed exposure to coccidiomycosis from those wonderful scary jumps.)

Mostly what Billy and I would do was go into the apple orchard next to Mamie's house when they were drinking bourbon and Mamie had tea. We could climb up high in trees where nobody could see us, and we could spy. Best was in the fall when we threw soft, part-rotted apples at the trucks speeding down the highway. Splat! It was great! One Sunday, a truck we splatted slammed on the brakes, and we ran.

Coming home in the car, tired and sleepy, was best. We listened to Jack Benny and Fred Allen on the radio with Billy lying on the back seat and me lying in my favorite place, up on the shelf under the back window.

SOUTHWEST SABBATICAL

by Lynne Waymon

“Nobody in their right mind wants to come live in Washington, DC, in February!” That’s what friends and family told us when we began our search for a house swap during Todd’s sabbatical in the winter of 1990.

We lived in a house built in 1913 in Silver Spring, Maryland, less than a mile from the District of Columbia line and the Metro station. It was a cross between a lovely farmhouse that reminded me of my favorite aunt’s house in Kansas and a three-story continuous restoration project.

As the search for a swap in New Mexico began in that pre-Internet era, you must know that we were sure the right person was out there. Isn’t finding someone just a matter of telling enough people?

We surveyed the possibilities. Family? Friends? Business associates? Our son’s soccer team parents? People from our church? Surely we must know somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody who

December rolled around with no swap in sight. We wanted to leave in February. Time to up our game. I said to Todd, “Think of people we used to know.” He said, “My old friend Matt—haven’t talked with him in several

decades. I think his mom retired in Taos.”

Jackpot! It took only a few phone calls to find out that Todd’s college roommate’s mother’s friends wanted to come to DC to do some genealogical research at the National Archives. Don and Dixie sounded like the perfect people. They lived just outside of Taos. They came highly recommended. We liked talking with them on the phone. We’d switch houses and cars. And a bonus—we got to “take care” of their pickup truck while they got to take care of our two cats. What a deal! We didn’t ask the cats.

As February approached, we checked off the “to-do’s” for spending seven weeks in the beautiful Southwest. Matthew, our eight-year-old, was excused from his Montessori school by the principal. “He’ll learn more in this adventure than we could ever teach him,” she said with a goodbye wave. We had our airplane tickets. We mailed car keys and house keys to Don and Dixie, and they sent theirs to us. Somehow, by some prior arrangement that I can’t recall now, we found their car left at the Denver Airport, and they located ours at Reagan Airport.

It must have been afternoon when we landed in Denver. We found their car, pulled out our map, and headed south for Taos. We settled in for a five-hour drive. Dixie had explained how to find their house. “Just drive along the road on

the mesa near Taos. As you pass each house, push the garage door opener. If it opens, that’s our house.” She explained that people didn’t really need house numbers. “Everybody knows where everybody lives.”

Sure enough. The garage door opened, we walked in, unpacked just enough, and fell into bed for a good night’s sleep. Waking up in the beautiful morning light, I had my first glimpse of our new home. Big windows in three directions showcased the mountain ranges. The living room, kitchen, and family room were one huge room with two bedrooms and bathrooms off to the side. I’d describe the decorating style as “friendly and comfortable.”

I knew the swap was going to be okay when I saw that they had exactly the same items in their refrigerator door as we did in ours back in Silver Spring—three mayonnaises, three mustards and two catsups. Don’t you always come home from the beach with extra packets? We do! Plus some cans of beer left from the New Year’s Eve party. You get the picture. Dixie and Don and Todd and I enjoyed about the same level of housekeeping.

One of our first adventures was a trip to the Taos Library. Dixie had loaned us her library card and raved about the friendly feeling of one of her favorite places in town. “You’ll love it,” she said.

Matthew and I found the building—an old house. Surely, they have a children’s section, I hoped. Matthew, an experienced book chooser, was as eager as I.

An elderly woman was sitting at the front desk reading a book. I presented Dixie’s library card and said, “Good morning.” She glanced at the card and her head whipped up so fast she startled me. “And where, may I ask, is Dixie? And why do YOU have HER card?” As I explained the house swap, her face softened, and she said, “Well, all right then, I guess you can use her card for a few weeks. But be sure to bring your books back on time.”

As you probably know, the best way to get the feel of a town is to peruse the bulletin boards—at the library, the grocery store, the coffee shop. We were excited to see a big poster announcing that the Taos Pueblo was open for visitors on Friday night. We got there early, munched on some fry bread, and waited for the dancing to begin. We watched, rapt with attention. When the dancers invited everybody to join in, I was so proud of Matthew, who jumped right up. He copied the steps he saw and waved at us, grinning from ear to ear. Maybe as someone who’d been born in Nagpur, India, he felt like he’d found his people.

Driving Don and Dixie’s pickup truck was a hoot. Matthew loved riding up

high in the cab. One day Todd asked him, “Hey, you want to try skiing?” He was already experienced with soccer, football, and basketball, so his hearty “Yes!” was no surprise. We drove to a nearby ski resort and signed him up for a lesson. He came down a beginner’s slope several times while we sat inside sipping our hot coffee. When Todd asked him, “Well, what do you think?” Matt said, “You can cross that sport off the list—too cold!”

In addition to giving us their house, Dixie and Don also introduced us to several of their friends. The D’s, as we began to call them, came back to Taos a couple of days before we left so we could meet face-to-face. We decided to give them a surprise dinner party and invited a few of their friends, too. We’d been in touch a lot during the seven weeks, so they already felt like family. That’s when they admitted that they had never taken care of cats before but assured us that Hot Fudge and Popsicle were alive and well.

So, what are our favorite things about house swapping? Unpacking once. Getting to act like “natives” and meeting the locals. Finding useful things like scotch tape and scissors. And, of course, as with any trip, arriving back home.



IOWA/MARCH by Phyllis Purscell

Nothing as grey as a late winter
afternoon in Iowa. The cold just tire-
some.

January vigor gone, replaced
by the pouting damp of early March.

To be leaving the Strand Theater
and Gene Kelly for the ancient ice
of Harrison Street gutters was almost
more

than a twelve-year-old girl could stand,
knowing what Hollywood knew,
that nothing happened in Iowa.



CAN AI WRITE A LIMERICK? by Todd Waymon

I was in Penn Hall when Fellow Resi-
dent and NYU Adjunct Professor Ron
Slivka gave a talk about Artificial Intelli-
gence and introduced us to ChatGPT.
It could do lots of things, it seemed—
even write poetry!

Programming wasn't foreign to me. I
had been a programmer at IBM no less;
then I taught it at Montgomery College
in Takoma Park, Maryland. I knew that
computers were just two-bit machines
that could only do this or that. I even
taught a brand new course in 1982:

Introduction to Artificial Intelligence.
Ron's talk showed me just how much has
happened since then. His enthusiasm
was catching. I wanted to know more.

Meanwhile, right before Christmas, my
wife Lynne and I both came down with
a mild form of COVID. We'd have to
miss all the festivities. I think we were
most upset to miss the 50th Anniversary
Party of some old friends in Cherry
Hill. What could we send them to mark
the occasion?

Aha, I thought. A perfect opportunity to
try out ChatGPT. Ask it to write a cele-
bratory limerick for them! That should
be easy—the rhyme scheme AABBA,
the meter 33223. Surely, AI could whip
out the perfect limerick.

I went to chat.OpenAI.com and logged
in. There was a box that said You. That
was where I could type my Prompt
telling ChatGPT exactly what I wanted
it to do. I typed: "Write a 3-verse limer-
ick to celebrate the 50th wedding
anniversary of Lynne and Paul. She got a
law degree from Vanderbilt and worked
in public interest human services in
Philadelphia. She volunteered at the
public library and loves being in a book
group with women friends. Paul was in
the Marines, graduated with a PhD from
Vanderbilt, was an adjunct professor at U
Penn, then got his MBA from U Penn
and worked in banking. They lived in

Philly with several cats. They got married in Japan. Vacation in Costa Rica.”

That ought to do it! I hit Return and in an infinitesimal amount of time up came stanzas 2, 3, and 4. I added the first verse later as an introduction

*We're crushed not to be there tonight.
But COVID has banned that delight.
So we'll just say to all
Congrats, Lynne and Paul
Via ChatGPT, we write . . .*

*In Philly, Lynne, a legal ace,
From Vanderbilt, her path did trace.
Public service her creed,
With a book group to lead,
In the library's warmth, she found her
own space.*

*Now Paul, a Marine strong and true,
Vandy PhD, education he drew.
At Penn, he did teach,
Then an MBA reach,
Banking his forte, success he knew.*

*Fifty years together, oh so divine,
Married in Japan, love did entwine.
Costa Rican delight,
Vacations so bright,
With cats by their side, their bond did
shine.*

Not bad, I thought, kind of clunky though: did trace, did teach, did entwine, did shine. Should lines 1, 2, and 5 be

three beats or four? Most limericks use three.

Anne Baber (our editor and my dear sister-in-law) agreed. She was overjoyed that the first verse—by human being, me—was so much better than the others. Aha, the machine isn't winning yet!!

Of course, our friends Lynne and Paul, raved about it. Though they too thought a human could do better.

SMALL BUT FIERCE

by Kathy Hoff

And though she be but little,
she is fierce.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream,
3.2.325*

At midpoint in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Puck's carelessness with magical love juice has caused massive comic confusion, former best friends Helena and Hermia get into a girl-fight over their switched boyfriends. Helena is tall and fair; Hermia little and dark. But fierce little Hermia is getting the better of the fight, so Helena appeals to a boyfriend to defend her:

Helena:

O, when she's angry,
she is keen and shrewd!
She was a vixen when she
went to school:

And though she be but little,
she is fierce.

Hermia:

“Little” again!
Nothing but “low” and “little”!
Why will you suffer her
to flout me thus?
Let me come to her.

[Lysander, Hermia’s pre-switched
boyfriend, is restraining her.]

Lysander:

Get you gone, you dwarf;
You minimus, of hind’ring
knotgrass made;
You bead, you acorn!

Ah, Hermia, my sympathies. Nobody has ever called me “bead” or “acorn” or accused me of stunting my growth with knotgrass, but I’ve heard “dwarf,” “midget,” “shorty,” “shrimp,” and assorted other belittling descriptors. They come with the territory when you are below average height.

In my earliest elementary school years, my inseparable best friend and I were the Helena and Hermia of Broadview Terrace. Years later, Judy Anderson’s high-school yearbook blurb began, “A tall lass with a striking figure . . .” A blond, nearly six-foot Scandinavian beauty, Judy became a model. My yearbook blurb began, inevitably, “Tiny in stature . . .” Although we graduated from high school in the same class, our friendship had ended, unfortunately, in third grade when I left the neighbor-

hood during World War II. We never had any Helena-Hermia squabbles over boys.

The consolation for losing this best friend was cousin Jan with whose family mine lived for a year during the war. Two months apart in age and nearly the same height (I was a tad taller), we always saw eye-to-eye. Jan and I liked to imagine we were twins. I suppose it was this connection that made me aware shortness was family heritage. By the time I was an adult, I could respond to height comments by explaining, “It’s genetic. I’m taller than my mother was.” One of my nieces was medically examined in childhood for dwarfism. She was cleared. As an adult, she buys children’s casual shoes, but has to special-order her size 3½ dress heels. Her adult daughter is even smaller, tinier than anyone else in the family.

Being short has a few advantages. Unless one is also wide, it is easy to acquire the “cute” label. One gets moved to the front row in group photographs and pushed forward for curbside viewing at parades. Also one often gets taken for younger than one actually is. All of these advantages apply to women only. While patriarchal culture indulges and “cutifies” little women, it awards leadership positions in business, industry, and politics to tall men.

Even for women, though, the disadvantages of shortness outweigh the advantages. Despite available petite sizes, skirts, trousers, and sleeves are usually too long, making it challenging to find clothing that fits without costly alterations. Seating is uncomfortable when one cannot rest one's feet on the floor. Upper shelves are inaccessible, reducing usable storage space in closets and kitchens. Public speaking behind podiums awkwardly calls attention to one's shortness. At Pennswood, one needs a step stool to resettle displaced microwave turntables after housekeepers' visits or to clean dryer filters. It's a stretch to replace the shower head in the upper bracket when a housekeeper has left it in the lower. But one has had a lifetime to get accustomed to such trivia. Never having known the advantages of normal height, one doesn't usually miss them.

What I have never quite gotten accustomed to, though, is that adults have not entirely outgrown elementary school "shrimp" stuff. Where the anti-small bias becomes truly problematic is in professional contexts. As women's liberation opens career possibilities for women, shortness can become a liability, just as it is for men. My yearbook blurb moved on from "Tiny in stature" to "a cute little miss." For high school, "cute" was fine—better, in fact, than alternative labels that might have been applied to a bookish girl. But it wasn't fine for a well-meaning male senior colleague at an all-male uni-

versity to write in a supposedly supporting recommendation for a professorial position: "She looks so cute with her tall students looming over her." At the university where I spent most of my career, I was introduced as keynote speaker at an honors banquet by a tall male administrator: "This is Dr. Katharine Hoff, who lacks stature." Though I was not Her-mia-fierce enough to punch him for the belittlement, I thought about it.

The only time I used my lack of stature to advantage professionally, I actually did punch a male upperclass student for mocking a freshman girl struggling with presenting an oral report. When he threatened loudly, "I'm going to report you to the Dean," I responded even more loudly, "Go right ahead. You'll look mighty silly, though, since you are a 6'2" athlete and I'm 4'11". He subsided immediately, slumping down in his seat to make himself as small as possible. His classmates laughed at him.

When another small woman, a physics professor, was union president and I chief contract negotiator, she and I sat across the table from the academic vice president. In the men's room, where he regularly tried to make side deals, he told one of our male bargaining team members, "I like Joan and I like Kathy, but together they're a pair of piranhas." We small women can indeed be fierce—when we want the world to take us seriously.

TOURISTS SAY THE DARNDEST THINGS

by Sean Fox

Some people bring home refrigerator magnets or mugs from their travels. For many years as Vicki and I have visited national parks and monuments, I've been collecting stories from park rangers.

Dinosaur National Monument, bordering Colorado and Utah. Its spectacular Quarry Exhibit Hall allows visitors to view about 1,500 dinosaur bones still embedded in the rock in which they were found. Some of the Late Jurassic remains on display belong to Allosaurus, Diplodocus, Stegosaurus and others.

It also encompasses some beautiful, and lonely, high desert country where summer temperatures can be dangerously hot. So, when a ranger saw a car sitting by the road in a remote spot in the park, he asked if the family needed any help. "No thanks, we are just waiting to see some dinosaurs." Perhaps another tourist was expecting something like the movie *Jurassic Park* as she asked, "What time do you feed the dinosaurs?"

Yellowstone National Park. The world's first national park is known for its spectacular geology and wildlife that is sometimes too accustomed to human presence. I once stood with a ranger as we watched elk resting in a meadow. Another tourist came over and asked if

he could throw rocks at a nearby bull elk. The ranger asked, "Why do you want to do that?" "To get him to stand up for a better photo."

Perhaps he was the same tourist that a ranger saw trying to push a black bear into his car beside his wife and child. The ranger managed to peacefully scare away the bruin. He then asked what the guy was thinking. He said he just wanted to get a funny photo of the bear seeming to be driving with his wife and child. The ranger added that before it left, the bruin looked at the human with an expression on its face saying, "I can't believe you're so stupid."

Yellowstone also shows evidence of ancient Ice Age glacial activity. One spectacular example is a glacial erratic, a massive bolder, about the size of a house, that was carried far from its natural geological location by an ancient glacier and now sits alone in the forest. A skeptical tourist wanted to know how could a glacier do that without flattening the trees.

Wanting to know more about trees, another person asked, "How can you tell virgin timber from the other kind?"

The Arizona Memorial in Hawaii's Pearl Harbor. It is a beautiful and solemn structure. When we visited there 50 some years after the ship became a great tomb resting on the harbor bottom,

oil still leaked up to the surface from the massive wreck dimly visible below the memorial. Wanting to see more, one tourist asked where the elevator was down to the ship.

Arizona's Grand Canyon. Vast and stunningly beautiful, some of its rock dates back more than a billion years. The Havasupai tribe has lived there for over ten thousand years and calls it "an upside-down mountain."

One tourist, however, just wasn't impressed. When told that the park had no golf course or tennis courts, he asked indignantly, "Well what am I supposed to do, look at the scenery?" Others wanted to know, "When do they turn the lights on in the Canyon?" and "Are the mule trains air-conditioned?"

Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park.

This site preserves some of the most impressive Ancestral Puebloan archaeological sites in the United States. Most popular are the ancient large pueblos built into the cliffside for defense. Possibly annoyed at the required long drive up to the mesa top to see the site, one tourist wanted to know, "Why did they build the ruins so far from the highway?" After her husband asked why the people built the pueblos into the cliff's sides, his wife said, "To protect themselves from the dinosaurs, stupid." And a fun malapropism, "Do you have anything nice to see in the virginity?"

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