



## BACK TO THE FARM

It is tradition. It is extended family and friends. It is an escape from the daily work grind. It is the tranquility of the open skies and endless green horizon. It is the annual WELH reunion.

It is hard to believe that it began 35 years ago, in 1979, when at EIU's campus radio station, Mark Hepner used the back of some old UPI news copy as a sign-up sheet for a summer party at his farm in Kewanee, Illinois. Being mostly city kids, what harm could ever come from spending a weekend drinking and raising some hell in the middle of nowhere. Challenge, on.

Though the numbers dwindled over the decades, the core group of five kept the tradition alive. Through thick and thin, good and bad, life and death, the bonds of friendship were so-

lidified in the bedrock of that thin, beige wire copy sheet.

Kewanee is an All-American type town. It was part of the industrial revolution, famous for its boiler factory. But as with the rest of the Midwest, time, new technology and urbanization has taken its toll on the town. It has reverted back to a mostly farm community.

The surrounding farm lands tilled by immigrant Germans and Swedes still yield a bounty of corn, soybeans, hay and oats. This year's short corn crop could be confused as bean fields as one races along the highway at 65 miles per hour. A wet spring and delayed planting season may tarnish the "knee high by 4th of July" almanac adage. But no matter, the people take the weather as it comes to soldier on the Midwestern Way.

## ***A LETTER FROM THE PUB***

For no apparent reason, I have been hand drawing many graphics in the past few weeks. I don't know if this is a creative cycle or a subconscious desire to flash back to 1979 when editorial cartoons were only drawn with paper and ink.

It is not that I have extra time, but a new found creative energy or spark to document events in a more consistent manner before memory turns fuzzy. Maybe it is a stress relief safety valve which is suddenly stuck in the open position. Whatever the case, another week and another trip. This one was a day trip to visit friends in Henry County, Illinois, an almost annual pilgrimage tied back to the college radio station, WELH.

## ***THE ZEN OF THE ROAD***

I can fully understand and appreciate the appeal from the turn of the last century “Sunday Drive.” If one worked hard enough to be able to purchase a motor vehicle, one’s day off would incorporate the new found element of personal freedom by taking family or friends for a drive into the countryside.

The automobile is so hard-wired into the American culture, most no longer appreciate the concept of the Drive.

I planned the day trip to Kewanee on Flag Day to begin very early in the morning. The news reports of looming road construction got me thinking that I had to hit downtown K-town before 11:30 a.m. so I could get into the WELH safety deposit box at the People’s Bank. I figured there could be some issue with access, since my records indicated that we rented “Box 195” but the key Mark Hepner gave me when we opened the box in 2004 is stamped “205.”

When the five of us opened the account at the bank, there was some confusion about the rental. At first, we were to get a regular box. Halfway through the paperwork, it was decided to change to the biggest box available because this would be our reunion archive. At some point, Hep gave me the second key for safekeeping; I could not recall that was before or after “the change.”

From my perch in the Northwest Suburbs, it is about a

160 mile trek to Kewanee. With no big traffic delays, it should take around three hours on the road. Factoring in the possibility that the bankrupt state would be coning off lanes to pretend to be fiscally spending tax dollars on needed road repairs, I felt that I had to hit the road around 7:30 a.m. to give me a deadline comfort zone.

I topped off the tank with \$4.09/gallon petro at the mouth of Route 53. One locks and loads and turns on the air-con and radio as the car snakes down the expressway ramp. At that moment, the first progressions of guitar picks to Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” creep out from the stereo speakers.

This was the traditional song we used to play to end our college parties. So I thought things were starting off well.

If one starts early enough on a clear Saturday morning, the

expressways can turn into personal runways. I-355 turns into an open race course after Roosevelt Road. One can comfortably blister south to I-80 in less than an hour. Prior to this extension, one would have to veer toward the city to catch an interstate connection.

And once you get through the Joliet exits, one can put their mind in cruise control as the miles click off like the bass drum from the FM tunes. The landscapes roll by like a Jackson Pollack work prior to his brain splattering surrealist modern paint drip style.

The road whistling by at 70 mph is like a mental laundry in its basic wash and rinse cycle. You don’t have to think about work. You don’t have to think about much. You let your latent driving skills go auto pilot while you multitask to the sights and sounds of the road.





It is like on cue that strange things seem to happen to us on these trips. Apparently, we too often forget that America is a weird but wonderful place.

For example, at the first rest area west of Joliet, the parking lots were filled with tandem trailer trucks. Some truckers were sitting at picnic tables recaffeinating and conversing with their fellow road masters.

But at one end of the lot was a vintage VW beetle and van. A soundbite went off in my head; it was Rocky's voice making some crude comment about hippies.

In the grace of the messed up Illinois General Assembly, it passed a law increasing the speed limit on Interstates so people could flee the bankrupt state faster. At 70 miles per hour (plus), I was clipping along through the increasing cross wind in record time.

A long drive is like being in a barometric chamber. It is therapeutic as well as practical. If you like to drive, it is like the car's alternator is recharging your own batteries as well as the one under the hood.

One can arrange and rearrange one's thoughts without the interruption or distraction of outside influences. When we travel to Kewanee, we have had no expectations except the good company and hospitality of our friends and their community. Any pretenses were left at home. Only a couple of bullet points on the agenda this time around; do some business and re-connect with Hep's family.

As I passed the large but seemingly dormant ethanol plant outside of Annawan, I realized that the time had snapped like a sci-fi story line; I was going to reach Kewanee prior to 10:30 a.m.

## THE WAY OF THE PEOPLE'S

We always thought that it was ironic funny that in a conservative rural farm town like Kewanee, one of the local downtown banks was named like a Cold War Soviet institution, *The People's Bank*.

Since host Hepner banked there, we opened the reunion safety deposit box there.

It was not crowded for a Saturday morning. The local farmer stand near the train station had just ended so there was no real foot traffic in the area.

I walked back to the open vault door and presented "the key" which was the hall pass to the secret treasurers. As the woman was going through her long vertical index cards to match the key with the signature card, she said "oops, wrong one." I thought I was doomed by the nightmare scenario --- the wrong key. But no, she pulled a second card with our five signatures on it. I signed away and we went back through the narrow row to the box. I had to go to reach to the very top to pull out Box 195. Yes, so this confirmed that key 205 opens Box 195.

Yes, that is another wacky aspect of life in the plains. Things can be weird so long as they work. I got the box, opened it to place a few papers inside, as well as taking out the Tontine for further registration at a later time.

I figured I had time to

actually inventory the box, but I decided that can be a group project at a later day.

I thanked the clerk and re-set the box on the top row of the vault. Then I asked to update the account and billing information. So I completed a new customer form to finalize my first objective of the trip..

Little did I know, that once The People’s got a hold of you, it will call you back.

Since I had alleged hours before Mr. Hash would conclude his master-of-ceremonies duties for the Steamboat Race in Peoria, I decided to roll around town to see if anything substantial had changed in the last year. It had not.

There appeared to be a few exterior repair projects on stores near the Walmart, but there were more empty store fronts.

So after a quick tour (the town is not that big to get lost in), I pulled into the convenience mart to pick up a newspaper with the intent of heading over to the diner near the train station to get a late breakfast/early lunch and then wait for Matt’s arrival from Peoria.

That seemed like a reasonable “wing it” plan. I texted Matt that I had accomplished the banking errand. I then walked into the nearly empty diner.

I already had my standard

road trip order in mind: the BLT, because as spokeswoman Carrie Keagan says, “You had me when you said BACON.”

I sit down, give my order without glancing at the menu (I



**LAURA, I PICKED UP SATURDAY'S EDITION OF THE DISPATCH. WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO WITH IT?**

had been there before), when Mrs. Hepner called me from the farm. Apparently Matt had contacted her moments earlier with the allegedly breaking local news that “Paul is in town.”

Yes, I was in town and we arranged to meet.

Then afterward, Matt texted me that Mrs. Hepner

would be calling me. I replied that she already had done so.

Shortly thereafter, Matt texted me stating that Annette wanted to meet me at the bank to get into the box.

So I left the diner like a marionette puppet with Matt’s directions to meet Annette. She was as confused with Matt’s communications; but it was nice to see her. She told me that Jerry had sent her an envelope to be put into the box. I told her I already did my banking, and could put the envelope in when we return if Jerry comes out this summer. She was relieved by the calming non-urgency of the situation. I told her we’d meet up when Matt arrived in town.

So I headed back to the diner to wait for Matt’s meal bacon passing arrival.

## THE ZEN OF RECOGNITION

I told Matt that his story was as strange as strange gets, but par for the course in our reunions.

Matt said he was in the lobby of the Mark Twain Hotel in Peoria on Friday night. He was minding his own business because he had an early start announcing the race the next morning.

But what happens next both unexpected (with astronomical odds) yet prototypical of being at the right place at the intersection of the present and the past.

There was a low, male

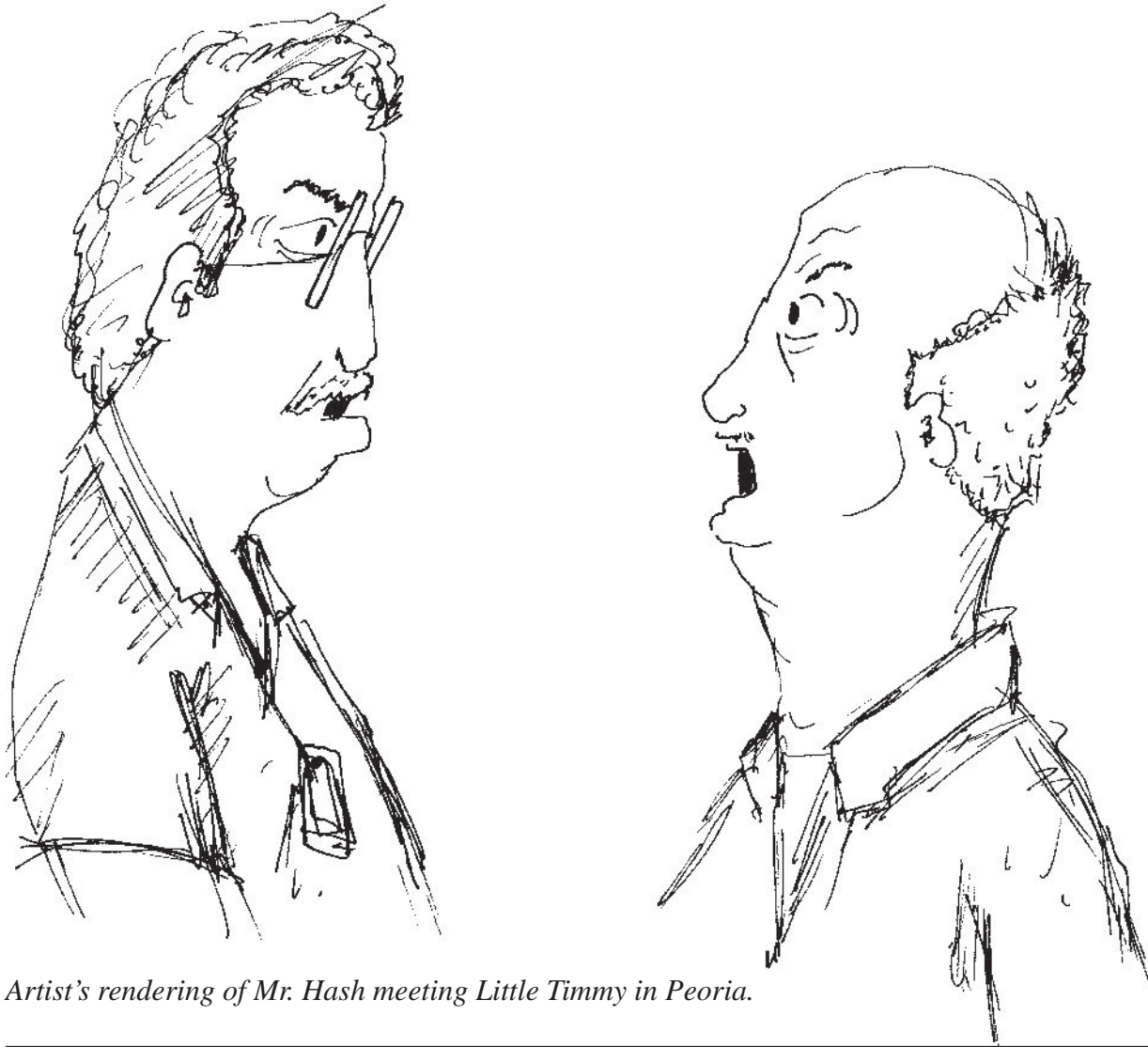
voice that said, “Matt?”

Matt looked up startled. “Timmy?!”

In all the lobbies, in all the hotels in the Midwest, there was the intuitive recognition on this WELH weekend.

Unexpectedly, Matt had run into Timmy Curtis, former radio alum and roommate of Mark Hepner. Timmy was the out-of-control protagonist to Hep’s conservative student in the Odd Couple based comic strip, *The Raunchy Roommates*, that Hepner drew for the Daily Eastern News.

To say Tim was a party



*Artist's rendering of Mr. Hash meeting Little Timmy in Peoria.*

animal back in the day, would be doing The Day a disservice.

Matt had not seen Tim for probably 30 years. Curtis was in Peoria that night for a family wedding. Matt believed that there was some cosmic karma in play for their paths to intersect in that way.

Indeed, it is beyond mere coincidence.

As we continue to honor Mark's memory, these strange events continue to spark old memories.

I recall the road trip to Western Illinois to call a game. Timmy was one of the few guys at the radio station with a car. I had a Standard Oil credit card so I could help pay for fuel. So we jammed the crew into his car and headed off to WIU. But on the way, he needed gas. We pulled into the Roadside Tap in Havana, Illinois. It was beyond horror movie seedy. Timmy had only five dollars left in his pocket. The bar's glass refrigerator case contained only one quart of beer left.

The decision was obvious: Tim bought the beer. I think he tapped the fuel gauge and said everything would be fine as we sped down the back roads to Macomb.

That's the way we rolled back then; college stupid. We never thought twice about the driver's decision.

But we got to the game, broadcast it back to campus, and returned home without killing ourselves or anyone else.

Matt and I spent the rest of the day visiting with Mark's family. There was a lot of memories and laughter

Annette was in the process of moving to a new home in town. It is very nice newer home with a large yard and apparently an "interesting" history. Linnea will start her senior year, then decide on which college she may attend next year.

We also spent time with Mark's parents. Mrs. Hepner pulled one of her scrapbooks that contained a volume on WELH radio stuff, including old promotional flyers, Mark's FCC broadcast license, station ID cards, and other assorted paperwork. On the way out of town we paid our respects.

We parted at Route 78, thinking about returning later in the year.



On the road back to Chicago, I passed the now non-breaking news of a large, petro-based fire in progress just outside Joliet

