



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A RETIRED YANKEE-NEVADAN
A George's Journal Extra
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With obviously not enough to do, I decided that it would be interesting to document in detail my activities for a day; a project similar to one that we once did at the Bell Telephone Company. That project had been dreamed up (no doubt) by some "new manager" hired fresh out of college and was called a "time and motion study." Each craftsman had to account for every fifteen minute period of his workday, and the study went on for two weeks. As a supervisor at the time, I found it to be not only annoying but also non productive. A big part of that two week period was lost to the "art of creative writing." Remembering all that, I elected to wait till the end of the day to do my summary, but I would do it while I could still remember what had happened. The following, for what it's worth, is the result of that harebrained idea:

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The light of dawn illuminated our bedroom as Old Sol crept inevitably up and over the rooftops across the street. I was restless but knew that I needed another half hour between the sheets, so I rolled over for the umpteenth time and, half dreaming, half awake, contemplated some of the things I might do today. Sure enough, twenty minutes later I'd had enough rest, threw back the covers and slowly, carefully eased out of bed. I learned a few years ago that it's not a good idea to "jump right up," as sometimes one's body can't quite keep up with the messages from the brain so early in the day.

I made a mental note that in a few days it would still be fairly dark at this time, as the clock would be set ahead in one of man's cute ways of fooling with the laws of nature. As long as we've gone this far we might as well leave it an hour ahead the year round, so I wouldn't have to change over three dozen timepieces (at my latest count) twice a year.

Having by now reached the sink in the near bathroom, I turned on the hot water faucet and let it run from cold to warm. I can't abide cold water

for washing. In the interim I brushed my teeth, then passed a damp soapy washcloth over my face and neck. I didn't need a shower, having taken care of that chore yesterday afternoon after working in the garden all day. I don't make a habit of showering on a daily basis, only as my activities demand.

I pulled on my underclothes, donned the pair of tan twill pants with all my "stuff" in the pockets (keys and penknife, right front; handkerchief, right rear; wallet, left rear; lighter and coins, left front), wriggled into my short-sleeved shirt (with my clip-on sunglasses in the right pocket, my electronic organizer "memory" in the left), pulled on my socks (first the left one and then the right) and shoes (right or left first, it didn't matter).

Now I unplugged my electric shaver and mowed a day's growth of whiskers from my face and throat. During this five minute ritual I reflected that I could go a day or two without shaving, now, since those little devils turned white and hardly show. But I still respect the idea of a clean shaven image.

Lastly, I dabbed a little water on the sparse growth of silvery hair above and combed it into the style that I've used for over half a century: a part on the right and a slight pompadour to the left. Less than fifteen minutes time had elapsed, and now I quietly opened the door and walked through the bedroom to the hall, closing the latter door on the still sleeping (hopefully) Rita.

As I entered the kitchen I noted that the sun's rays were trying to peek through the shutters on the east window, so I opened them to let the light spill onto the counter. At the same time I noted that the sky was of a deep blue color, and not a twig was moving in the calm. It had been thus for several mornings now, ever since the 25th of last month. I checked the outside temperature. It was 40 degrees Fahrenheit. "Good," I thought, "I can enjoy my coffee and breakfast on the front porch in the sun.

Ritualistically, I took the coffee pot from the maker, turned, filled it to the five-cup mark with pure water from the refrigerator spout, poured it into the top of the coffee maker and replaced the pot on the heater. I took a filter from the cabinet above and placed it in the filter holder, got the stainless steel coffee canister from the cupboard under the oven, measured out six cups worth of fresh grounds into the filter and placed the holder in its niche above the pot. This operation had become so routine that I was unconscious of my actions and apt to forget some step in the process. But today everything worked.

I decided on Cheerios for breakfast, selected from a wide variety of cereals including Wheaties, Raisin Bran and Puffed Wheat (we were out of Grape Nuts), accompanied by three fig Newtons, as usual, and a glass of grapefruit juice with my daily vitamin tablet. Occasionally I opt for two slices of toast or an English muffin instead of cereal. And if there are cake doughnuts in the house I enthusiastically include one of them in my menu.

Before juggling the mug of coffee and bowl of cereal through the front door, I put on a visored cap to shade my eyes. Still in my shirtsleeves, I sat down on the porch settee and ate and sipped my simple breakfast in the warm sun. This was not an uncommon experience for me, though relatively few people in the world live where they could do the same as often.

My breakfast, that had been quick and easy to prepare, was downed without haste but in a short time, making way for a perusal of the morning paper that had been delivered to the doorstep at four thirty. Of today's paper, like most newspapers of our era, probably less than half of its bulk contained newsprint; and certainly less than a third of that was worth reading. The rest of it was devoted to the squandering of material resources, pulp and ink, in the form of advertising which seldom if ever attracts a glance from me. Unfortunately, to allow more space for FULL page advertisements, the print size was recently reduced to the point that I often need a magnifying glass to read it.

I started with the most enlightening page, the comics, and read about half of them - all that remain of the descent strips which used to fill the page. The remainders are so sublime as to be insulting to my intelligence.

From there I went to the first section, which more often than not has so-called "human interest" stories all over the front page, and I have to find the real news in small columns tucked away inside. After a while I took my "read" sections in to Rita, who was now up and about in the kitchen. Outside again, with a warm-up of coffee, I glanced at the local and business sections of the paper. Most of the material there was either of little consequence or old news to me, and when through reading it I felt like I'd wasted my time. Even so, the sun and the sights and the birdsongs and the fresh feel of the morning air were compensatory.

At last I took the paper and dishes inside, stacked the dishes in the dishwasher, dumped the coffee grounds from the maker into the waste basket under the sink, removed the plastic liner of rubbish from that basket and hauled it through the sliding door across the patio, alongside the trailer by the garage, popped it into the big, plastic rubbish bin on wheels, closed the lid and retraced my steps. It felt a lot cooler out there in the shade and I was glad it was a quick and easy chore.

I usually take a teakettle full of water out to the bird bath in the backyard, along with a small scoop of wild bird seed for the elevated feeder there. But this morning I postponed that job and Rita later attended to it.

The next ritual was a ten minute visit to the bathroom, a habit necessary to insure the well being of any one no matter his position in society. I admit that I was not so well disciplined in that regard when I was busy in the work force, a fact that sometimes resulted in uncomfortable times.

It being Thursday, a watering day, and the lawns being dry despite some earlier watering, I enabled the timer to run through a cycle of all the circuits; twenty minutes to each circuit. And that reminded me to do the same at our neighbor Maureen's place. Rita said that her back yard had seemed wet enough, so I enabled only the front yard circuits to cycle in her yard.

Now, as I had decided in my waking hour, after letting Rita know that I would be out and about, I went to the Travelall and lifted the hood. It had not been run in a week's time and I wanted to find out just how much of the fuel in the carburetor had leaked or evaporated from the bowl. I removed the air cleaner, partially removed the top cover of the carburetor and, using a small mirror to reflect the sun, peeked into the bowl. Aha! Just as I'd thought. The level of gas was only one-third as high as normal

or full. That explained why I'd had so much trouble trying to start and run the engine after weeks of idleness. Satisfied, I replaced everything to normal. After a few seconds of cranking, to refill the carburetor, the engine started easily and I ran it for about ten minutes to warm it up. From now on, I resolved, I would start and run it on a weekly basis.

Finally I was ready and took off in the Travelall, going first over to Long's Drug on East Prater Way to do some minor shopping. I was fortunate to find a screen-head for my Braun shaver there, an item that neither Wal-Mart nor K-Mart had had. And while there I picked up some crackers, sugar-free Ricola cough drops, a supply of Hoover vacuum bags, and an anniversary card for Betty and Art whose date was coming up next week.

My next objective for the day was to continue my search for a new small roto-tiller, which I had begun yesterday after my mine wouldn't start, and, after some investigation, I found its carburetor to be defective. I had spent some time working on it but gave up when Rita remarked, "Why don't you buy a new one?" The more I thought about it the more I cottoned to her idea, especially since I had always had trouble with its starting and running and now I'd found a defective part and it wouldn't start at all.

Yesterday I visited three of the big hardware stores in the area and none of them had what I wanted as a replacement; namely, a slightly bigger machine but not so big that I couldn't maneuver it in my small garden area. Something with more than two horsepower but less than five. None of the stores had anything in that range, nor even one like my old one.

Now I lined up two small-engine stores on Glendale Avenue to check out, and if that failed I'd reluctantly go to Sears where I had purchased mine six years ago. I took McCarran south across the tracks and turned right onto Glendale, and as I approached the Sears warehouse I made a sudden decision to stop and see about a replacement carburetor. I hadn't been in that place for many years and it was quite different from before. Actually well organized. There were two clerks on hand and one of them, after attending to some detail with a secretary (I assumed), asked if he could help me.

I had my parts sheets with me and pointed out the one I needed, the carburetor, which, by the way, is smaller than a yo-yo. It would take ten days on order, and I believe he said it would cost \$54.00. About one-fifth the price of a new small tiller! I took the man's business card and left.

Farther west on the same street, I stopped at one and then the second small-engine store. The first, Honda, had but one tiny tiller in the place. The second had two of the little ones and one old five-horsepower machine in back. I was now down to my last resort: Sears at Meadowwood Mall.

I drove back east to McCarran then south all the way around to the mall. I was lucky in my choice of route, for there was very little traffic and virtually no "orange cone" zones on my way. The store would not be open for another half hour so I parked the old Travelall in a shady spot, entered the main mall and made my way to the food court near the Sears door. The smell of fresh brewed coffee beckoned and I bought a small cup of plain brew, sought a vacant table and slowly sipped and savored the stuff. Until 10:00 AM.

At last the gate went up. I tossed my cup into a trash bin and entered the Sears store along with a dozen other people. On my way to the hardware department I remembered that I needed some brown shoe polish, so I sidetracked to the shoe department where I found the brand (Tote's) that

I'd been unable to find in any other store. Even that was not easy, as I had to rifle through at least two dozen cans of "black" before finding only three of "brown." All this time the clerk stood by watching and only offering, "I'm sure there's one in there somewhere." I picked up one can and at the small counter waited (as usual) about five minutes while the clerk and his computer came up with the price. I handed over the cash, got my change and left. On to the hardware department.

I looked at some electric blower/vacuum machines, with the thought that one might be useful in the fall for getting the leaves out of our flower beds – not to mention the cactus patch. At roughly \$50 the price was about right. Then I turned to the tillers, and noted that Sears had more and better yard machines than any place I'd been. There were a half-dozen of them on display, two small ones and four of the larger size. There was a guy there about my age who was also in the market for a tiller. But he, too, wanted one a bit bigger than the small ones, and of course there were none of a size between two- and five-horsepower ones.

The young lady clerk was very helpful but she could not accommodate our needs. Apparently no one has manufactured a tiller in the mid-range size, even though all of the stores I'd visited had had inquiries about them.

I drove back via McCarran and Longley and Rock, to arrive home at about 11:05. Rita was in the front yard, and she watched as I backed the Travelall up onto the north edge of the driveway and stopped. "I thought I'd help you unload a new tiller," she said. I don't recall my reply; my thoughts were already working on a way to fix the old, defective tiller carburetor.

Yesterday, our neighbor across the street, Duane, had hauled a large enclosed trailer up and backed it onto his driveway. I wondered if it was somehow connected with his hobby, that of riding and winning "dirt bike" motorcycle races, but he and his wife were so involved in parking the trailer I felt I shouldn't bother him. Today I walked over and talked to him, and learned that I'd been at least partly right. He was going to a meet this weekend and would use the borrowed rig for that purpose and also to haul his son's small, broken down pickup back from California.

Rita was on her way with Maureen to some function or other and then to a movie. "Have fun," I enjoined, then proceeded to the kitchen to fix my favorite meal, a sandwich, for lunch. Today it would be bologna with butter on white bread, four dried dates, a handful of cheese crackers and a tall glass of water.

With lunch in hand I went to my den, the southwest corner bedroom where most of my personal indoor things are quartered; that is, a file cabinet, papers, books, desk, word processor, small TV monitor, video recording and editing equipment, black & white Xerox copier, encyclopedia, and several wall shelves loaded with small items of memorabilia and heirlooms. I spread a paper napkin on my desk top, placed my lunch on it and sat down on my swivel chair. While enjoying the lunch I turned on the TV, switching from a news channel to the congressional channels to catch up on the latest goings on in the world and in our capital. Twenty minutes or a half hour later, having downed my lunch and learned about all I wanted to know and more about the world's news, I stretched out on the sofa for a nap. If the sun had not disappeared behind some high clouds I'd have lain on the floor under its window-filtered rays, but now the sofa would do.

For years I had listened to the radio almost everywhere I went – in the car, in the yard, in the house – to a station carrying good music from the 30s, 40s and 50s. But recently the new owners of the last station to carry such music decided to drop that format, and the good old disc jockeys as well, in favor of a cacophony of noise and blather for the younger generations. So now I listened to a tape cassette, one of many that I had recorded some years ago in preparation for just such a demise.

A half-hour went by, and I was unaware of the transition from consciously hearing the music and drifting off to dreamland, when I awoke with a start and knew that I'd been asleep. And that's all that mattered. I was now ready for the afternoon's activities.

Back in the garage, I emptied the gas from the small tank of the tiller and lifted it, the tiller, up onto my workbench where I could fairly well see to work on it. I fetched my box of old discarded springs of all sizes and selected the smallest, weakest one of the bunch for my purpose, which was to attach it to the "throttle return" shaft to hopefully do the job of the original which had broken. This done I got the machine down on the floor, poured a bit of mixed gasoline into the tank (it's a 2-cycle motor) primed the carburetor and pulled the starter rope. Voila! It started on the first pull. More importantly, it remained running at idle speed, a feat it had not achieved for a couple of years or so.

By now my motivation for tilling the garden had waned, and besides, at almost 80 degrees it was too hot to suit me. I would do it tomorrow morning when it should be cool and pleasant. Anyway, I found a number of other things around the yard that needed doing, most of them in the shade.

On one of my many trips back and forth around the back yard I noted that the berry basket I'd placed under the eaves a few weeks ago appeared to have some twigs in it. On closer inspection I found that it did. The house finches had finally decided to nest there. (A few days later the nest would be plundered by, most likely, one of the alien starlings that now inhabit the West.)

By mid afternoon I was ready to go back inside. I brewed three cups of coffee in our electric maker. A few minutes later, I poured half of the aromatic product into my mug and left the rest for Rita in case she wanted it. With that I returned to my desk and the word processor, to spend the next couple of hours writing some long overdue letters to family and friends. (Over the past twenty years I have written, mostly typed, an average of about five letters a month.)

At five o'clock, or a little after, I quit the typewriter and wandered into the living room. Rita was already stirring in the kitchen, preparing our evening meal. Those meals vary from a grilled cheese sandwich to a grilled steak and baked potatoes, usually accompanied by fresh vegetables such as lettuce or cabbage, and/or a hot vegetable such as peas or string beans, or fruit in a salad. This evening it was fried chicken, potatoes (pressure cooked in their skins), a chunk of iceberg lettuce, hot biscuits and honey, and red Jell-O on the side. (Rita has a penchant for red Jell-O.) It was, for me, a gourmet meal. The kind you just can't buy at a restaurant.

Ever since our kids left home – which seems a long time ago now – we've taken our dinners in the living room on TV trays; trays that are aptly named as we watch the evening news on the telly while eating. I regret to say that in recent years the TV newscasts have "gone to pot," so to speak, since

virtually all of the newscasters, local and national, have adopted a format of several times "previewing" the news coming up and then interjecting their personal opinions and inane comments and flat attempts at witticism. Of course the worst part, true of all contemporary television newscasts, is the fact that not only is there about 18-minutes of commercial advertising every half hour, but also about two-thirds of the commercials and much of the so-called news consist of health-related subjects, including the mention of bodily functions and maladies totally unsuitable for dissemination at mealtime. Or any other time, for that matter. Every weekday there are two hours of this tripe available at mealtime. I usually sit through an hour of it, then leave for the sanctity of my den where I can either watch something else on the telly or, more often than not, go to reading or writing.

Tonight I took a few minutes to update my journal. I should explain that I don't write up entries every day, as I know I should, but keep abbreviated notes in my electronic pocket-minder and transcribe them to paper every three or four days; hopefully before I forget the details behind my cryptic notes.

Sometimes in the evening, when there's a good documentary or another worthwhile program on PBS, I join Rita in the front room to watch it. Otherwise, if I'm not writing letters or something, I reach for a pre-recorded video tape of an old movie; a movie that I had recorded at night or early morning from a TV channel for viewing at a more convenient time. As is the case with radio broadcasting, any more there is a paucity of good movies on the telly; that is, those produced in the years before they were spoiled by the infusion of obscene and unnecessary language, gory and false special effects, and obnoxious noises. Not to mention loud and dissonant so-called "background music." On this night I chose to watch Gregory Peck in "The Bravados," one of the very fine movies that I'd not viewed for a time,

Well now, it had been a long enough day for me and it was time to turn into a bed. (A neat trick that you don't have to be a magician to accomplish.) I shut down my electronic devices, turned out the lights in my den (Rita was still relaxing in the front room) and headed for the bathroom to prepare for the night. This routine was pretty much in the reverse order of the morning operation (described at the beginning of this documentary) and within ten minutes my pants and shirt were hanging on the back of the door, my shoes were cooling on the floor below the window, my face and teeth felt a lot cleaner than before and I was ready for sleep.

Lights out.

"Hm-m-m-m-m..." I sighed as I slid under the covers on my side of our standard size bed. What a luxury, I mused. And the thought reminded me to again give thanks to God: For our warm, snug, comfortable house in a neat, safe and congenial neighborhood. For the bountiful provision of food for our table. For my having been born into such a good family and country. For my many years of wonderful experiences under His guidance, and for His blessing me with a devoted wife with whom to share the pride and pleasure of three fine children and two grandchildren.

As a child I had learned, without having to be taught, that the best way to get to sleep is to think about something pleasant, something good that had occurred that day or something you might plan for the morrow or beyond. Now I thought about how I had finally, after a lot of frustrating

times, succeeded in getting my tiller to start and run. I could feel a smile on my lips at the thought. Then I began to make plans for tomorrow, for actually using the tiller in the garden. I'd start by moving the hothouses off of their permanent positions, then I'd work the compost I had already spread into the soil. I would replace the...houses....and.....do some.....

By then I was asleep, I'm sure, although I have always found it hard to define just where one slips over that misty threshold between a conscious thought and a subconscious dream.

Anyway, my Friend, such was a rather typical day in the life of this old Yankee-Nevadan in the spring of the year, 2002.

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After Word

While my haywire carburetor fix worked well enough to till my garden, it still didn't run as well as I thought it should. So I "bit the bullet" and secured a new carburetor, from Sears, which I installed with the feeling that there was nothing more that I could do. The machine does start more easily now than in the past, but it still "runs rough" at full throttle and under load.

C'est la Guerre!

[Signed] George A. Phelps