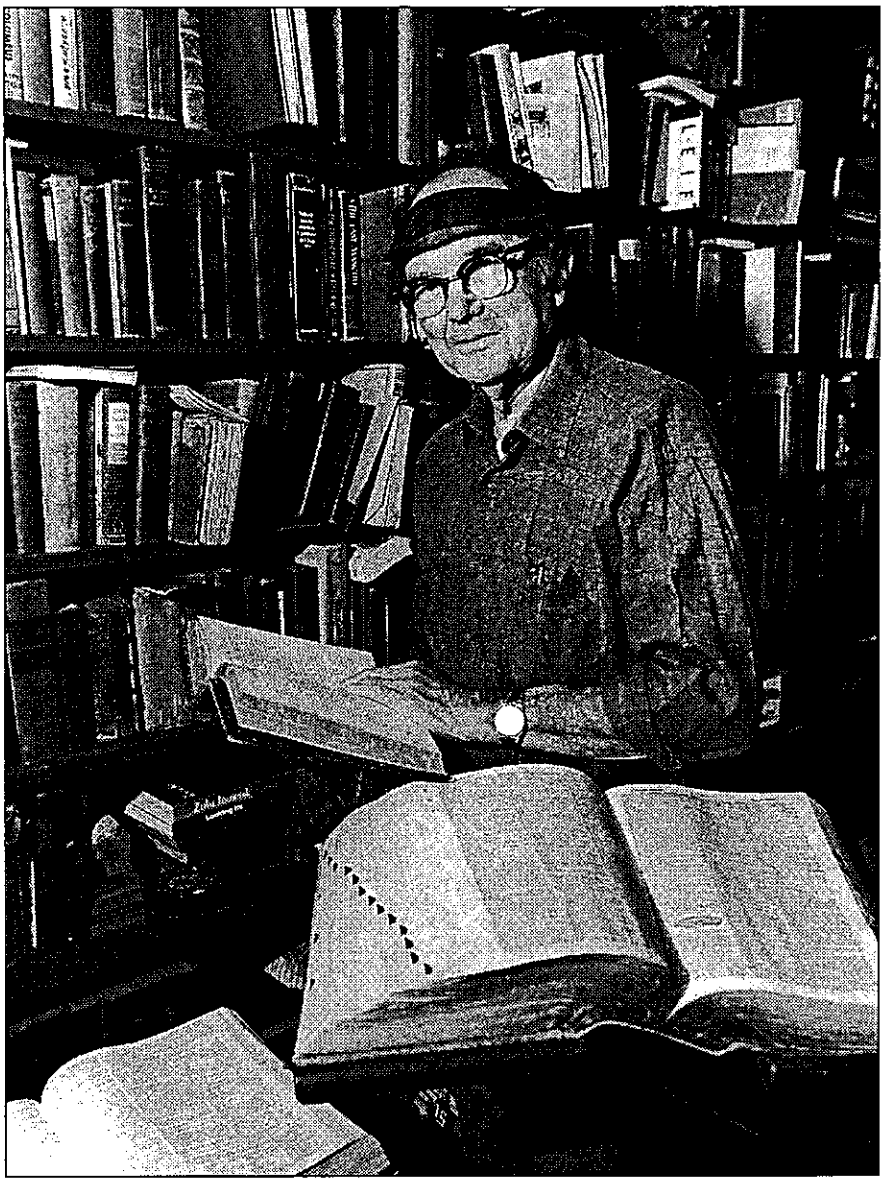
Selected ramblings
of Willys I. Peck

From his writings in the San Jose Mercury News,
Perspective section, 1985-1999



"It was well and truly stated by a late guru of your craft, Mr. Heywood Broun, that writing for a newspaper is like spitting in Niagara Falls."

SILICON VALLEY SHIFT:

Seeds of orchards' doom date to 1940s

Sunday, March 7, 1999 -

What's the difference between one section of the country being transformed from verdant landscape to dense cityscape and the same thing happening in another?

None, if you're one who arrived during the metropolitan metamorphosis.

Quite a bit, if you can't shake off the image of miles of orchards in bloom, superimposed on current vistas of shopping malls and subdivisions. It's an affliction that goes with being chronologically and geographically challenged – in short, an old-timer.

The sensation gained stimulus from Cisco Systems Inc.'s announcement last week of a planned 400-acre industrial campus in the Coyote Valley, drawing some 20,000 employees to San Jose's last rural enclave – concurrent with the season that, in earlier times, would have been the advent of blossom time in the orchards.

From a historical perspective, the transformation might seem inevitable. Many of the factors that made the region ideally suited to the growing of deciduous fruits also are conducive to the growth of the electronics industry.

But was it really inevitable? Consider the background.

Up through World War II and immediately following, the Santa Clara Valley was the Valley of Heart's Delight, an undisputed leader in the production of dried and canned fruits.

It had everything going for it: ideal climate, rich alluvial soil, plentiful water, an efficient transportation network and local supporting industries, such as for the manufacture of canning machinery and the cans themselves.

This seemingly idyllic equation was upset by the war. Industrial plants took on new importance. The Joshua Hendy Iron Works in Sunnyvale – now Westinghouse -- produced triple-expansion steam engines for Liberty ships being built in Bay Area shipyards. Food Machinery Corp. -- now FMC Corp. – branched out from machinery for canneries to the production of war materiel.

Perhaps most significant was the arrival of people from other parts of the country, drawn by the Bay Area's war industries. Military personnel, too, were stationed at regional posts such as Moffett Field in Mountain View and Camp Roberts near Paso Robles.

They liked what they saw, and vowed to come back after the war – which is exactly what they did.

Lots of them.

This, in turn, created something of a housing boom. Outfits like the Pacific Manufacturing Co. in Santa Clara and Chase Lumber in San Jose were kept busy turning out the mill work necessary for the construction of acres of new homes.

That raised a collateral issue: Here were all these people coming in, and where were they going to work?

Thus was born the Industrial Department of the San Jose Chamber of Commerce, dedicated to the proposition that the Valley of Heart's Delight was just what the IBMs and Fords of this world were looking for. Essentially, they were right.

But what of the orchardists, producing their seasonal cornucopias of tempting fruits? They didn't just silently steal away.

For several years, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors had an agriculturally oriented majority and a county planning director, Karl Belser, who deplored San Jose's annexation incursions across the valley. Greenbelt zoning was tried, but it is an economic axiom that when an industrial plant is located next to an orchard, the orchard won't be there for long: Its value as land for development becomes fargreater than as a producer of crops.

Now we have the Williamson Act, which preserves an agricultural tax base for property dedicated for a certain length of time to agricultural use – but the pressure to develop is still there.

The old issue of creating jobs for people coming in has been completely turned around. Now the problem is finding housing for those being drawn to newly created jobs. This region's high housing costs are the stuff of legends. Did someone say 20,000 new jobs in Coyote Valley?

So the image has changed. The valley has traded heart's delight for silicon. And only the chronologically and geographically challenged pause to ponder whether there was some point at whichthe course could have been, not reversed, but at least slightly altered to have preserved some of the old image.

After all, what price image?

FEELING NOSTALGIC?

Maybe it's terminal

Sunday, March 8, 1998 - Do you habitually refer to your auditory appliance as a "radio set"?

Do you still talk about playing phonograph records, despite the fact they're really CDs?

In your scheme of things, is "word processor" just somebody's fancy name for a typewriter?

As to mail, do you rely entirely on "U.S." rather than "e-"?

In talking to a small child about trains, do you invariably use the term "choo-choo"?

If you had to make out an accident report to your insurance carrier, would you call the lower part of the car body along the side a "running board"?

If you answer yes to two or more of the foregoing, then it's fairly certain you're suffering from terminal nostalgia, or TNOS as it is becoming known in medical circles.

The term "suffering" is somewhat deceptive, however, since those afflicted with TNOS generally exhibit no more symptoms than a state of mild euphoria.

As to "terminal," the only really life-threatening feature would be reliance on some outmoded and discredited home remedy for illness. Still, there is no known cure for TNOS. Heavy applications of silicon in its various permutations – mainly computers – have been tried, but to no avail.

One of the dominant symptoms, aside from the euphoria, is a reluctance to part with documents and artifacts of an earlier era.

For instance, as the TNOS poster boy, I could probably assemble a crystal set from parts saved over the years.

This was a type of radio that utilized a galena crystal in lieu of tubes (another archaic term) in filtering and transforming radio waves so that programs could be heard through earphones. Tuning was done with a "cat's whisker," a fine wire that made contact with the crystal. When I was in grammar school, that crystal set was a great way to catch such classic programs as "The Devil's Scrapbook" after I'd gone to bed and presumably was asleep.

TNOS in its severest form is manifested in stacks of old newspapers and magazines, which occasionally prove useful settling arguments as to when a particular event occurred. Did you say the St. James Park lynchings didn't occur until 1934? I just happen to have the 1933 newspapers describing the event right here.

At present, I'm thinking of setting up a TNOS support group to help in coping with such things as relating current jargon to reality. For instance, "World Wide Web" conjures up an image of gigantic spiders wrapping the earth in gossamer strands. "Online" only reminds me of World War II duty as an infantryman. "Real time" always strikes me as needing an adjective between the words, like "good" or "bad."

All in good (real) time, though. Meanwhile, spring is almost upon us and I think a good initial activity for the TNOS support group would be a tour of the blossoming orchards in the Valley of Heart's Delight.

You can't say that again

Sunday, Sept. 14, 1997 - As heretical and improbable as it may sound coming from one associated with the craft, it is a provable fact that people who work for newspapers are capable of making mistakes.

If it weren't for this fallibility factor, I would be without one of the prized collections in my archives: bloopers that made it into print, many in this very newspaper.

Easily the most outlandish was the near-sacrilege appearing on the Dec. 3, 1958, editorial page of the Mercury. Some background information is necessary.

This was back in the "hot type" era, when lines or slugs of type were assembled in page forms on a heavy metal table, and pictures such as syndicated cartoons were cast in type metal from a species of plastic mat.

In this particular issue, the editorial cartoon was of French President Charles de Gaulle, depicted as a proud father in a maternity ward, admiring his progeny, the newly elected French National Assembly, which looked exactly like him. "Spitting image of papa" was an entirely appropriate overline, or above-picture caption, describing the subject matter.

The only problem was that the printer who assembled the page picked up the wrong mat and, instead of a casting of the de Gaulle cartoon, made one that apparently was for the church page, or for an ad. It depicted a stained-glass window portrait of the Madonna and Child. "Spitting image of papa" was NOT an appropriate overline.

"Do you suppose they really mean this?" Dale Cockerill asked as we leafed through the first issues to come off the press, checking for just such disasters as this. Cockerill, the wire editor, and I, a city desk assistant, were the last editors on duty at the end of the shift.

I started laughing so hard I couldn't have protested to anyone. Cockerill had the presence of mind to have the press stopped so a pressman could chisel off the offending words. The press run continued with the stained-glass window representation, and a blank area above it. Then they got the right picture and the overline back in place.

But several hundred copies with the offending label had already been run off and loaded onto trucks for delivery to the Monterey Bay area.

The objections came in sufficient volume to warrant sending an explanatory form letter to those who protested.

Composing-room errors were easier to make back then, simply by picking up the wrong type or cut, like the time in January 1974 when the "Show times" label appeared over the funeral notices on the obituary page. (Now playing at a mortuary near you.)

Use of the wrong word accounted for some of the more glaring examples. There was the November 1976 Page 1 story about a woman's body being found near Lexington reservoir, her throat slit. "A grizzly discovery by youth," read the secondary headline, or readout. It somehow harked back to the legendary "Mountain Charley" McKiernan, who had an encounter with a grisly bear near there.

Copy editors, the people who write headlines, have to be careful about words that can be used either as verbs or adjectives, especially those involving violence. "How M.D. can help rape victim," a 1976 headline that seemed to cast aspersions on the medical profession, could have been helped by joining the last two words with a hyphen.

Colloquialisms also can be awkward in a headline. "Senators grill Dean Rusk," in June 1966, smacked faintly of cannibalism. Something new in labor negotiations – or maybe it wasn't new in 1984 – was suggested in the headline "Restaurant union reaches pact with clubs."

Then there was the October 1967 Page 1 non sequitur in 144-point type, "Berserk, he calmly kills 6 friends."

Scatological bloopers are always good for a yuk, such as the caption under a picture in the food section that was supposed to read, "Hearty Nero 'burgers make easy and filling noontime fare." The trouble was that the "e" in fare came out "t."

Somewhat the same atmosphere was created by a section page headline, "Miss San Jose may break air speed records," Miss San Jose being an airplane. Here the problem was that only the first two lines were above the fold, and until the whole page was spread out, it read simply "Miss San Jose may break air."

In the days when there were society pages, errors there seemed to have a particular poignancy. Such was the January 1962 account of a young woman's engagement party, only it came out that her "enlargement was told at a dinner party."

Then there was the 1972 society column about the doings at Pebble Beach, noting that "The parties started lust week . . ." which some might have considered a Freudian slip.

Then there are the headlines that appear just plain mischievous, such as "Stiffer funeral rules proposed," and one over a letter to the editor, "Surgery shows Reagan has guts."

I wasn't above that sort of thing myself, and I like to think that my finest hour occurred with a story about the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors considering the acronym "SCAT(s2)" as a name for the light-rail system: Santa Clara Area Trolley Transit, or some such.

In writing the story, reporter Scott Herhold made the trenchant observation that "scat" is a term for the droppings of wild animals.

This allowed me to write the only possible headline, "Dung! Dung! Dung! goes the trolley."

When hitching was the only way to go

Sunday, Feb. 16, 1997 - Hitchhiking as a means of travel has gone the way of the kerosene lamp as a means of illumination, and more's the pity. As one who logged several thousand miles through the agency of an out-thrust thumb, I feel a twinge of guilt whenever I pass anyone signaling passing cars for a ride, but pass them I do.

Maybe that forlorn-looking chap is a paragon of rectitude who really needs a ride. Then again, maybe he isn't. The risk is two-edged; plenty of hitchhikers have been set upon by their supposed benefactors. It seems part of the general unraveling of the social fabric as the millennium winds down.

I started hitchhiking as a freshman at Los Gatos High School on the occasions when I missed the bus to Saratoga - which had no high school - and needed a ride home. Often as not I'd be picked up by someone I knew; these were small towns back then.

I didn't get around to really serious hitchhiking until several years later when I was in the Army, and then it was the standard means of travel while on pass or furlough. "Give a serviceman a lift" was a popular theme, and one who took it seriously was my mother. During the war years and after, she gave book reviews and conducted creative writing classes in adult education centers in San Mateo and Burlingame, usually at night.

She would always stop for servicemen as she drove up El Camino Real, prompting various family members to question the wisdom of giving strange men a ride at night. Her view was that, as long as strangers were helping her own two boys in uniform - my brother was in the Navy - she'd do as much for other mothers' sons. It was a gesture she never had cause to regret.

In attending the University of California after the war, I frequently hitchhiked to Berkeley from home, usually going by way of San Francisco where I could catch the "F" train across the Bay Bridge and get off a couple of blocks from the campus. On these occasions, I figured that the books I was carrying might have helped the cause.

It wasn't until the summer of 1948 that I undertook a real odyssey. A college friend and I planned to take a leisurely hitchhiking tour around the country, but it turned out he couldn't make it. So I took advantage of a cross-country trip that several family members were taking and rode with them to Washington.

They dropped me off on the outskirts of the District, leaving me dependent on my right thumb which, being double-jointed, had what I liked to think of as an extra degree of visibility.

My first destination was Paducah, Ky., where I planned to stay with a couple who had befriended me when I was stationed in the area, and also see a girl to whom I had been writing while in the service.

I had enough money to cover meals and an occasional night in a cheap hotel, but not much more.

My baggage consisted of a small, inexpensive suitcase, its metallic covering gold-colored, just right for the big blue "C" I painted on it to attract the attention of drivers with a Cal - or Columbia - connection. I also carried an Army-surplus sleeping bag, which I never had to use.

Now, almost 50 years later, certain aspects of that somewhat circuitous journey remain vividly in mind.

There was a rather wild ride through the Great Smoky Mountains with some local characters, including the driver, who were passing around a bottle. There was the time after leaving Paducah that I wound up around midnight in the warehouse district of Louisville. Things looked pretty grim until a truck driver stopped and took me on to Cincinnati, where he let me off at an affordable - read cheap - hotel. There was the almost incredibly quick trip from Cincinnati to Cleveland, when I would no sooner get out of one car than another would stop for me.

Cleveland represented one of my main reasons for the trip. For three years I had been corresponding with a girl there whose brother had been in my rifle squad, and who, from her letters, seemed like someone I'd like to meet. Also, I was curious to see if she really was as beautiful as she appeared in a picture she'd sent. It turned out that she was. (In the interests of domestic harmony, I should add that, when I got married a few years later, it was to a girl who was even more beautiful. We celebrated our 45th anniversary this month.)

Reluctantly leaving Cleveland, I had no trouble getting a ride to Toledo, where I spent the night with an Army friend who was working on the Toledo Blade.

The next morning I set out for home and was promptly picked up by a chap in a 1946 Buick who was collecting hitchhikers to help with driving. He wanted to go nonstop to the Bay Area, where it seems there was some urgency in a situation involving his girlfriend. I was the first of three he picked up, and things went well enough until we got part-way through Wyoming. Then, somewhere in the boondocks east of Rock Springs, the generator failed, the battery ran down and we were stuck in the desert at night.

I suppose there may be subdivisions out there now, but at the time, the country around Rock Springs struck me as the end of creation; any farther and we'd drop off into oblivion. However, our host did manage to get the car running - at considerable expense - and we continued on to California, arriving in Berkeley on a Sunday morning.

I took a bridge train to San Francisco, where I could get a bus to Santa Cruz that went through Saratoga. I stopped to visit a girl who was getting established on the S.F. Chronicle staff, and, late that afternoon, boarded the Santa Cruz bus.

I felt as if I'd been awake for the past three days and, when I settled in my seat, immediately fell asleep. The bus driver shook me awake in Santa Cruz, and it was late. That meant a final night in a cheap hotel, but at least the driver, who hadn't bothered to waken me in Saratoga, didn't charge for the extra miles.

I occasionally hitchhiked during my senior year at Cal, making a trip to Los Angeles at one point, but after hiring on at the San Jose Mercury Herald in the fall of 1949, I felt the need of more reliable transportation, in the form of a 16-year-old car.

I never really missed the activity in later years, but I still feel that twinge of guilt in passing up a wayside supplicant. Maybe he's on his way to meet a girl.

Return with us now, to a time when ...

Sunday, March 17, 1996 - If there's any one thing capable of tarnishing the so-called Golden Years, it's memory's penchant for practical jokes.

I'm talking about recalling with clarity events of several generations ago and not being able to remember what one had for breakfast.

For instance, it gripes me that I can summon up a mental image of what I was wearing on my first day at school in September 1929, but, for the life of me, I can't think of the names of the interesting couple my wife and I met at a recent dinner party.

However, being occasionally of a philosophical turn of mind, I found I could employ this aberration in developing a sort of game, on the order of making lemonade when stuck with a lemon.

So I started a list of things and places that once were known by other names, which names sometimes crop up in the conversation of us older folks, to the puzzlement of younger ones.

For starters:

SUNNYVALE AIR BASE - Moffett Field. It wasn't called by the earlier name for long; the change occurred after Adm. William A. Moffett died in the crash of the dirigible USS Akron in April 1933.

The story goes that the name Sunnyvale was applied instead of Mountain View because of an unfavorable connotation involving mountains and aircraft.

MILLS FIELD - San Francisco International Airport. This used to have as its main building a single, large hangar, filled with biplanes and other interesting types. Then, sometime in the mid-1930s, United started flying in those 10-passenger Boeing 247s and there hasn't been a parking space since.

STREETCARS - Light rail. Once there were both interurban - sometimes called interruption - and city streetcar lines in Santa Clara County, but the latter term invariably was used for the rollingstock on both.

"Light rail" does sound a little more classy, but in this quarter, at least, it's the streetcar name desired.

MERCURY HERALD and EVENING NEWS - San Jose Mercury News. Until 1942, the morning and afternoon newspapers were competitors. Then the Mercury Herald bought out the Evening News and the papers continued, under the same roof, so to speak, but with a certain element of competition between the staffs.

The Herald appellation was dropped in 1950 by the morning paper, which continued under the Mercury nameplate. Years later, after the papers were completely combined, I was still reluctant to relinquish the name of Mercury Herald, my first newspaper employer.

TALKING PICTURES, TALKIES - Movies, films. The term didn't last very long into the 1930s; it soon became apparent that, contrary to some skeptics, the talkies were not a passing fad and Hollywood wasn't going to maintain its silents.

VICTROLA - CD, record player. Although there were other phonograph manufacturers besides the Victor Talking Machine Co., Victrola became sort of a generic term, much as the name Kodak was applied to cameras other than Eastman.

Old-timer or not, one should not, even in jest, refer to a state-of-the-art home sound system as a Victrola. There are some things one just doesn't joke about.

BOYS AND GIRLS OF RADIOLAND - Couch potatoes, junior grade. Long before television laid a withering hand on young tastes and intellects, radio was in there pitching, but with a couple of notable differences.

For one thing, you could do other things, even homework, while listening to the radio. Another difference was that the purity quotient was practically stratospheric. Today's kids have Power Rangers. We had Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy.

One of the most popular kids' shows was "Little Orphan Annie," a 15-minute serial episode that came on at 5:45 p.m. I daresay there are still people around on the shady side of 70 who can get through the entire cloying ditty that opened the show with, "Who's that little chatterbox, the one with pretty auburn locks?"

Among the popular kids' programs were the precursors of Mister Rogers, including a pre-Orwellian Big Brother. One of these chaps made radio history when, at the conclusion of a program and thinking the microphone had been turned off, he said, "Well, that ought to hold the little bastards for a while," or words to that effect.

Actually, the microphone wasn't turned off and the closing seconds of the broadcast created quite a stir out there in radioland.

Today, such an occurrence would scarcely raise an eyebrow, but back then there were those who felt it had set radio back a few years. Like maybe back to the Morse code and spark-coil era.

I'd go on with the list, but the Ameche* is ringing, and I'd better answer it.

*After "The Story of Alexander Graham Bell," a 1939 film starring Don Ameche. For a time, it was considered clever to use the name, but people were more easily amused back then.

A toy story that will gross out grown-ups

Sunday, Jan. 7, 1996 - Something was bugging Marcus Tullius Cicero back then in B.C. when he got off his line: "O tempora! O mores! (Oh, the times! The customs!)

The words came filtering back through memory from high school Latin class when, in a recent edition of this newspaper, I read about the trend in gross toys for children. That's gross as in disgusting, revolting, sickening - not quantity.

If Cicero found his times upsetting, he should check out how the fabric of society is being rent today. Cicero, I figured, wouldn't just orate or write about conditions - although he was pretty good at both - he'd want to do something about them. Like going out and falling on his sword.

I thought we had descended to some kind of cultural nadir 35 years ago and more when a cretinous entrepreneur marketed a fake hand grenade. This was a close copy of a regular fragmentation grenade, only when the pin was pulled, it didn't explode but went off with a harmless pop.

Hilarious.

"Startle ex-GIs," chortled the magazine ad.

As a World War II infantryman, I claim a sufficient familiarity with hand grenades to know they are not the stuff of practical jokes.

"Startle"? Try "heart attack assured."

Mercifully, this particular atrocity is no longer available; at least I haven't seen it advertised in years. I'd like to think it's because one of those startled ex-GIs shoved a specimen of the product down the manufacturer's throat. Sideways.

I think that the same kind of mentality that finds hand grenades hilarious sees the revolting as risible, the disgusting as droll. How else to explain the Grossinator, a mechanical doll that spews out raunchy sentences at the touch of a button? Or books that "detail the physiology of diarrhea," according to the writer of the article. Or noise-reproducing toys, and books such as "The Gas We Pass," illustrating how far we've come since the Victorian "breaking wind." And yes, the current vulgarism is in the book title.

How about a "Doctor Dreadful" kit with which one makes edible ice cream resembling gray-green vomit? Further gastronomic delights, such as road-kill sandwiches, are described in the "Gross Out Get Sick and Turn Blue Cookbook."

I'm not suggesting that a youngster who got some "create-a-corpse" plastic organ molds for Christmas is going to become a serial killer, but, in some grotesque way, they could turn out to be the gift that keeps on giving.

Nose-picking becomes an art form with "Gooey Louie," a doll with a large nose filled with - but why go on?

I guess what bothers me most about all this is the idea that the imprimatur of adult approval is given to conduct and material that, in an earlier time, simply wouldn't have been tolerated in most households.

But does all this have a bearing on basic morality? I submit that it does.

Morality, after all, isn't based only on the pronouncements of those regarded as blue of nose and strait of lacing. Morality is just another name for what works. If ever a single phrase could summarize human experience throughout the ages, it's "been there, done that," and it's well proven that things go better if one doesn't lie, cheat, steal, murder or act promiscuously.

Call it the moral compass, or the Ten Commandments, or the empirical method, it all comes out to the same thing.

But just because something is disgusting, does that make it intrinsically evil, or even immoral? I think it's working in that direction.

Once upon a time, when automobiles had running boards and the raciest program on radio was the Kate Smith Hour, a parent could chastise a youngster for using foul language, even wield the wash-your-mouth-out-with-soap threat, and make it stick.

But would that gambit work today, with a kid whose Uncle Eddie has just given him a copy of "Everyone Poops," and who probably bandies openly a once-taboo four-letter synonym? Not likely.

I'd say it logically follows that it would also become increasingly difficult to nail a youngster for casual lying, casual vandalism, casual thievery or casual sex.

I feel sorry for kids who got this kind of trash for Christmas, and sorrier for the adults who gave it.

Because someday, those same adults are probably going to wonder why certain members of the younger generation are turning out to be the kind of undesirables people don't want hanging around.

O tempora! O mores! O (deleted)!

NEXT STOP: SARATOGA

Scent of blossoms, sounds of trains

Sunday, Oct. 30, 1994 - It's a standard conversational gambit: Have you driven Highway 85 yet? What do you think of it?

My equally standard, if somewhat cryptic, answer is: I give it lip service.

What I don't explain is that LIP is my personal acronym for Living In the Past, a pursuit I find occupying increasing time as the shadows lengthen.

For my part, Highway 85 is the apogee of the love-hate relationship between freeways and my hometown of Saratoga that has existed for decades.

Some sort of bench mark for this relationship was established 45 years ago when it appeared that the state was poised to widen the north-south highway through the village area to four lanes, effectively bisecting the town.

At least that's what people feared.

This was before the present Highway 17 – then referred to as the proposed Eastshore Freeway, or Route 5 – had reached Los Gatos. The usual route for

San Francisco and Peninsula traffic to the Monterey Bay area was through Cupertino, Saratoga and Los Gatos.

In 1940, the state widened a two-lane stretch between Saratoga and Los Gatos to a four-lane divided highway, cutting off two very sharp turns, one of them known as Austin Corners.

Now, nine years later, they were preparing to straighten another section that included so-called "death curve," where Hill Avenue joins the present Mendelsohn Lane.

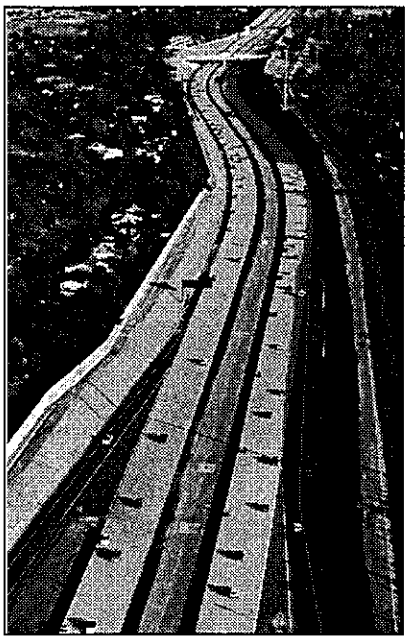
Fearful Saratogans saw this as the thin edge of the wedge for running four lanes straight through from El Camino Real to Los Gatos. They rallied, wrote letters and ultimately organized the Saratoga Highway Association, dedicated to keeping the freeway – any freeway – the hell out of the middle of town.

While this was going on, another group was endorsing the idea of four lanes through Saratoga, else the town would die on the vine, or some such.

The "death curve" realignment was accomplished in 1950, with only two lanes, but the freeway specter continued to hover. The Saratoga Highway Association was pushing the idea of a bypass, where any freeway-type thoroughfare would angle off at the Azule – later Blue Hills – railroad crossing, proceed through orchards bordering the Southern Pacific tracks to Vasona Junction outside Los Gatos, and there join whatever freeway was being built through Los Gatos.

Fast-forward to 1994:

The freeway – Highway 85 – doesn't follow the railroad tracks the whole distance through Saratoga, but it's reasonably close.



The orchards, of course, are long gone.

In the mid-1960s, Saratoga-Sunnyvale Road was widened to four lanes into the center of town, narrowing down to two lanes as it becomes Saratoga-Los Gatos Road, thereby promoting the frequent exchange of earthy comments between drivers trying to occupy the same space at the same time.

None of this, of course, was accomplished without protest and counter-protest. Not the four lanes into the center of town; not Highway 85 itself, which existed for some 30 years as a dotted line on a map; not the access approaches, whether there should be any at all in Saratoga, and if so, where? None of these questions lacked dedicated partisans on both sides.

For me, one of the really poignant elements in the whole scenario is the disappearance of Congress Junction.

Of course, Congress Junction by that name hasn't existed for 35 years, but the place where Saratoga Avenue crossed the Southern Pacific tracks conjured up its own set of memories.

It was "Congress" because of Congress Springs, the mineral water source in the hills back of town that was responsible for Saratoga being named for the New York spa. The "Junction" derived from the crossing by the Peninsular Railway interurban tracks that ran along Saratoga Avenue.

A commuter train to San Francisco ran from Los Gatos, through Saratoga, Monta Vista and Los Altos, joining the S.P. main line at California Avenue in Palo Alto.

Until early 1940, the commuter train originated in Santa Cruz; after that it continued with Los Gatos as the terminus, and, finally, Vasona Junction.

Commuter service ended early in 1964.

It was a pleasant, if not exactly speedy, ride to San Francisco. When the prune orchards were in bloom, there was a section near Monta Vista where the trees practically brushed against the cars, and one had the sensation of traveling through a tunnel of blossoms.

In the days of steam power, the early-morning whistle as the train approached Congress Junction seemed, like the crowing of a rooster, a reassurance that everything was in place and the day could begin.

With the changeover in motive power in January 1957, there was a new sound. That first morning, my daughter, not quite 3 years old, came running into our bedroom. Her alarm was evident.

"Mommy, Mommy," she exclaimed, "I hear a diesel."

Young as she was, it was if she sensed that something cherished and familiar had passed from our lives, as indeed it had.

In 1959, Congress Junction became Champagne Fountain, obviously at the instance of the Paul Masson champagne people, who had built their Champagne Cellars at the crossing. In my book, it was and remained the bottling plant, but I deny having any knowledge of the wag or wags who substituted a "Hiccup Gulch" sign at the station.

Today, what had been Congress Junction consists of a gantlet of traffic lights controlling access to Highway 85; a couple of monolithic structures over Saratoga Avenue, one bearing the freeway itself and the other the rerouted S.P. track; and the corners of some sound walls.

Archaeologists of some future era digging at the site may think they have stumbled across a later manifestation of the Mayan culture, but really, guys, it was only our little old freeway.

Oh, the train. There is one, a freight that carries coal for the furnaces at the Kaiser Cement Corp. plant and returns with carloads of cement. As a rule, it makes the run three days a week, and is of particular interest to railroad buffs because it's the only freight train in the area that still includes a caboose. It may just be the perversity of my nature, but I'm inclined to refer to Congress Junction in directing people to my house from Highway 85, a tactic roughly comparable to an erstwhile citizen of Pompeii giving street directions in that city after the eruption of Vesuvius.

"Go south on Highway 85, turn west at Congress Junction, travel about a mile and a quarter and I'm the third house this side of the Blossom Festival grounds."

Now that's what I call LIP service.

For the British, caveats come with civility

Sunday, Feb. 20, 1994 - "Toilet engaged," proclaimed the illuminated sign at the end of the British Rail car.

It called to mind the halcyon days of society pages, when such tidings rated newspaper headlines.

"I think they were made for each other," I murmured to my wife, eliciting only a puzzled "Huh?"

But I happily made a mental note of one more example of the folksy civility with which the British express even the most mundane public request or announcement.

A "mind your head" sign, evocative of motherly clucking, warns of a doorway's limited clearance.

At some railway stations, it's audible. "Mind the gap, mind the gap," admonishes a taped voice, not for a zipper-check but calling attention to a difference in level between platform and car.

Such an approach could, I believe, be profitably emulated here in the Colonies. For instance, I'd be more responsive to a sign saying, "Please do not allow your dog to foul the public footpath," than to a terse, almost menacing command to "curb your dog."

And I don't know if the sign registers on fractious patrons at a pub and restaurant called The Flask, but I'd like to think that "Please leave quietly and do not take the glasses with you" has stayed an occasional wayward hand.

In the same vein was a sign at the restaurant in a large estate that had been opened to the public: "Would customers kindly refrain from removing trays, cutlery and crockery from the restaurant and garden area."

Ordinary pedestrians are not forgotten. Stenciled in large letters on the pavement just beyond the curb at busy intersections are reminders to "Look right" or "Look left," probably inspired by Yanks who insisted on stepping into the path of cars coming from an unaccustomed direction.

However, the Brits also appreciate the proverbial iron hand in a velvet glove, e.g., the large sign on a car roof: "Driver under instruction. Keep your distance."

Which brings up the whole subject of British driving.

There were several times while riding with friends that I resigned my soul to its maker, consoling myself with the thought that at least the end would be quick.

Now, I don't consider myself a nervous Nellie, but English roads tend to be narrow; the Brits drive as if they were going to be late for a coronation; and they drive on the left.

However, they also operate on the rather astounding premise that the other bloke has rights.

The result is that cars – and they are practically all compacts, another saving grace – go barreling down roads designed for Roman chariots, weaving and yielding, with clearances in which an extra coat of paint could pose a real problem.

In fact, during the nearly three weeks we were there, a car fire was the nearest thing to a traffic accident that my wife and I saw, and even that seemed to be causing a minimum of congestion.

One of the most engaging aspects of the English countryside is the Brits' penchant for whimsical place names. As a longtime admirer of the works of P.G.

Wodehouse, I always marveled at the man's talent for coming up with designations like Totleigh Towers, or personal names like Augustus Fink-Nottle.

But when, on a map, you spot Biggleswade in Bedfordshire, or Tudeley in Kent, or Ecclefechan in Scotland, you now the man did not have to look far for inspiration.

There also seems to be a certain fascination with the gerundial or noun form of verbs in designating places, suggesting an aura of diligence in some sort of collective activity.

Thus we can envision villagers cheerfully Barking, Chipping, Tooting or Dorking, not necessarily all at the same time.

My favorite place names, however, belong to a pair of villages in Norfolk: Little Snoring and Great Snoring. In the latter, I am told, there dwells a man with the incredibly felicitous surname of Gotobed, and no, I am not making this up.

I never met the gentleman, but I like to think of him as a pleasant chap who amuses himself by registering in various hotels, just so he can watch the room clerk's expression when Gotobed of Great Snoring checks in.

In the words of that barbaric Yank policeman, it would make my day.

CAN'T IMPACT?

Mandate nouns as verbs weirding us all

Sunday, July 25, 1993 - Back in what might have been called my salad days, I figured the moss was always greener on the other fellow's back. Now, however, I readily confess that nowhere is the bryophytic accretion more verdant than on my own dorsal region. Perhaps this is most evident in my abhorrence of the breakneck speed with which the language is changing.

To be sure, English is and has been a dynamic language, which is right.

Otherwise we'd still be grappling with the Middle English of Geoffrey Chaucer, and spell-check software would be sending the nation's word processors into mass meltdown. ("Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable,/And carf biforn his fader at the table.")

But enough is enough.

That prepubescent sage, Calvin, of the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes," caught the essence of my gripe when he chortled, "Verbing weirds language."

He was referring to the practice of taking a perfectly serviceable noun and making it do extra duty as a verb, using "access" as an example.

Now "access" has been pre-empted by the high-tech industry for so long that it's not worth a salvage attempt. It's the same with most of the other nouns that now rate dictionary space with a "vt" or "vi" in front, for transitive or intransitive verb. They're caught up in a lexicographic maelstrom with no end in sight.

Actually, high-tech is entitled to swipe a term or two; its supply certainly has been raided. Look at "parameter," a precise mathematical description now used in referring to any kind of boundary. Or "interface," which sounds nice and shows up in all kinds of non-technical uses.

Consider words like "scapegoat" or "demagogue," once exclusively nouns, now often as not heard as transitive and intransitive verbs. They're right up there with "parent" and "pastor," not to mention "fellowship," "network" and "dialogue," verbs all, according to the current permissive dictionary.

And don't forget the language of protest: "We're going to leaflet, and then we'll vigil."

One of the most chilling excesses I've run across is the shortening of "incentive" to "incent" so it can pass as a verb. Not on my watch.

All right, you may ask, what's the difference? So what if sentences are shortened by eliminating a few modifiers along the way? After all, linguists tell us that words have meaning to the extent they are understood in their context.

This context-is-all approach has a certain logic going for it, but it also breeds careless usage of words. For instance, look what's happened to "rhetoric"; it's gone the way of "propaganda."

Originally, propaganda had to do with doctrines and principles, especially in religious movements. In the 17th century, Pope Gregory XV established a

College of Propaganda to supervise foreign missions and train priests for that service. Through the operation of two world wars, however, propaganda has come down to us, in the words of one commentator, as the next thing to a damned lie.

Is "rhetoric" faring any better? Not really. In its classical sense, it was the art of oratory, especially the art of influencing one's hearers. It had to do with the literary uses of language; in other words, very highbrow stuff.

Now, however, when one dismisses something as "so much rhetoric," the implication is that, if it isn't outright b.s., it at least has a rather high nitrogen content.

Another casualty of Calvin's verbing is "impact." Impact used to be a pretty heavy-duty concept. A pile-driver at work, a speeding car hitting a concrete wall, a speech that could arouse listeners to riot; these were the kinds of things that had impact. As a verb, it meant to drive or press closely into something.

And anyone suffering from an impacted wisdom tooth didn't need a definition.

But now, anything that affects something in the slightest degree is said to "impact" it. Argh-h-h.

"Mandate" is in pretty much the same fix. Not too long ago, as a verb it meant "to administer or assign (as a colony) under a mandate." In constant use as a verb today, it's simply another word for "require."

Probably no greater linguistic violence has been done, however, than to a word that in itself denotes violence: "mayhem." The essence of mayhem is mutilation or maiming, in which the word is rooted. Section 203 of the California Penal Code says that any person "who unlawfully and maliciously deprives a human being of a member of his body . . . or cuts or disables the tongue, or puts out an eye, or slits the nose, ear or lip, is guilty of mayhem."

It would seem that a teacher complaining of mayhem in the classroom had a real problem, but not as the word is currently used. Willful mutilation, obstreperous behavior, what's the difference?

The difference is that words are tools, and, just as a saw or chisel can be dulled by improper use, so can a word be robbed of its effectiveness by repeated and careless application. Abuse it enough, and a once-precise term won't be able to function unless it's propped up by modifiers.

Calvin's sidekick, Hobbes the tiger, had it right when he replied, "Maybe we can eventually make language a complete impediment to understanding."

OK, OK, so I'm cheeking it.

Tongue-wise, that is.

A LESSON:

Pre-Silicon Valley culture

Sunday, September 2, 1990 -

Good morning, class. For the benefit of those who may be in the wrong classroom, and others who have just awakened, the name of this course is Anthropology 4-F, Primitive Culture of the Pre-Silicon Valley.

In it, we will study the civilization that existed here before the advent of the semiconductor industry. It should be noted at the outset that the entire content of this course is at variance with the Big Bang theory, which holds that the present cultural level – to be generous with the term – sprang into being full-blown with the appearance of the computer chip.

Although traces of this earlier civilization are extremely rare, calling to mind the experience of the Aztec and Inca cultures, it appears from archaeological studies that these ancient peoples were quite advanced. They had a spoken and written language imilar to that in use today; they knew how to use tools; and they practiced a type of agriculture in which fruit-bearing trees were planted in close proximity to each other in groupings known as orchards.

Petrified remains indicate that these odd groupings of trees, or orchards, at one time covered virtually the entire valley floor, just as, in an earlier geologic period, it had been covered by water. Recent reports of orchard-sightings have proved unfounded, however.

Today's lecture takes up one of the more intriguing aspects of these early inhabitants, their use of a number of terms that are important today in the electronics industry.

While they couldn't have had any inkling of latter meanings, their use implies an almost eerie prescience suggestive of the ancient Egyptians and their applications of the science of astronomy.

To enumerate a few of these terms:

CHIPS: Aside from a basic difference in molecular structure, as between wood and silicon, the main dissimilarity between ancient and modern chips is that the latter had to be invented, while the former simply occurred.

In the pre-Silicon Valley, one of the main occurrences was at an industrial plant in Santa Clara called the Pacific Manufacturing Co., or simply the P.M. mill.

This plant, which shut down circa A.D. 1960, was called the largest detail lumber mill west of the Mississippi, which had then only recently been discovered by Hernando De Soto. It manufactured doors, windows, cabinetwork and molding, thereby producing quantities of chips by machines with such exotic names as shapers, planers, stickers and matchers.

These chips mostly were burned, generating heat for power, but some found their way into pits used in high-jumping and pole-vaulting, sports that were known even then.

DISCS, DISC DRIVES: One of the facets of the peculiar agricultural practices referred to – groupings of trees known as orchards – had to do with cultivation of the soil by plows composed of a series of large metal discs.

So prevalent was the use of these plows that the term was used in the verb, as well as the noun, sense. That is, to disc an orchard (peculiar grouping of trees) meant to cultivate it with a disc plow.

These plows were pulled by devices called tractors, or disc drives. It followed that a person driving a tractor pulling such a plow was a disc jockey, a term that has since been corrupted by the entertainment industry.

MAINFRAME: The early application of this term is somewhat unclear, but it appears that it had some use in another early industrial plant. This company is of interest today because one could tell by its name what it produced.

It was called Food Machinery Corp. because it made food machinery, that is, machinery for processing food, such as was grown in the peculiar groupings of trees, or orchards.

Some of this machinery included frames, and some of those frames had to be main. That's really all that is known, except that Food Machinery Corp. went through a number of name changes and today produces machines faintly suggestive of the tractors that used to pull disc plows in cultivating the peculiar groupings of trees, or orchards.

SOFTWARE: Records do not show the use of this term as such, but it is known that, during the summer and early fall, the Pre-Silicon Valley had more of this commodity than anything else.

Actually, the idea was to harvest the potential software before it got that way, since it is recorded that there was no softer ware than an overripe apricot.

Also, it is believed, unprocessed prunes could get pretty messy, too. Time does not permit going into the use of terms such as programmer and on-line, although they had their own application in this primitive, yet strangely enlightened, society. The material is in your text, which has the somewhat whimsical title: "After Amoebas, What?"

Again for the benefit of those who have just awakened, you can expect the matter in today's lecture to be covered in the first midterm.

Class dismissed.

Progress: It's not all it's cracked up to be

Sunday, July 1, 1990 - It's been some weeks now since I inadvertently referred to a compact disc player as a Victrola.

By dint of sheer willpower, I no longer address long- distance operators as "Central," nor do I ask a caller to "hold the wire" in summoning someone else to the phone.

I have ceased speculating whether the monogrammed "H" on the car stopped ahead of me at a traffic light stands for Hupmobile or Hudson. Now I know it's a Honda.

In short, for one born during the first quarter of the century, I claim reasonable adjustment to the manners and usages of its penultimate decade (the ultimate one doesn't start until next year).

However, before succumbing to unwarranted euphoria, I hasten to acknowledge a fly wallowing in the ointment; a cloud no bigger than a man's fist threatening to spread over the horizon; a little rift within the lute that by and by shall make the music mute.

In other words, there are some things to which I cannot and will not adjust. They're not trivial matters like heavy metal "music" or the wilder excesses of abstract art.

I'm talking about the big time, the metaphysical line crossed by humankind when sovereignty was surrendered to the machine, and we became servant rather than master.

That line was crossed not by the A-bomb in 1945, or by the computer a generation later, but by the power lawn mower, whenever it was that the first one lurched forth.

For it was at that moment in history that men – and a few women – admitted they couldn't handle one of civilization's most sensibly contrived implements: the hand-propelled lawn mower, lineal descendant of the McCormick Reaper.

The power mowers to which I refer aren't the big tandem arrangements used on golf courses, stadiums and the like, although there's a lot to be said for running a herd of sheep over the turf, as with old manorial estates.

I mean power mower as in the sputtering contraption some guy wrestles with in tearing up a postage-stamp-size patch of grass.

If the whole thing ended with lawn mowers, it wouldn't be so bad, but they were just the thin edge of the wedge, the camel sticking its nose into the tent.

Once people found they could abdicate the simplest of tasks, the floodgates were open.

Moribund muscles grew even more flabby as excesses of the machine age such as electric can openers, electric pencil sharpeners and even electric carving knives insinuated themselves into the culture.

The nadir was reached, however, with a device sprung full- blown, literally, from the jaws of hell, the abominable leaf-blower, a mechanical obscenity with no redeeming social value other than to rearrange patterns of debris.

Color me vehement, but it may have to do with my own adolescence, when a lawn mower was my passport to status, so to speak.

Immature, even for that more innocent era; awkward and shy around girls; inept on the athletic field; a student of only spotty ability, I sorely neededsomething to be good at.

What I was good at was mowing lawns.

Grasping the handle of a lawn mower, I was Tom Mix astride Tony the wonder horse; I was Errol Flynn swashing a buckle in "Captain Blood"; I was Douglas "Wrong Way" Corrigan resolutely piloting an aging Curtiss "Robin" across the Atlantic.

I whipped that mower around like a sports car negotiating a tough turn at Laguna Seca. After I'd run it over the grass on perpendicular courses, I'd trim the edges with hand shears, then, with deft strokes of a bamboo rake, get all the cuttings into a line, then together in a single pile. Speed, that's what I had; speed and accuracy.

And that lawn was mowed, a bowling green – a veritable pool table – in its smoothness.

But I detect a certain lack of gusto, of elan, on the part of those who guide power mowers over greensward of modest dimensions. They display little, if any, pride in craftsmanship. It's too mechanical; it's like discovering Norman Rockwell painting numbered segments on a canvas.

But that, to fall back on a euphemism, is progress. Maybe the century's final decade will see a return to the old values.

That's starting next year.

Oh say can you sing dah-dah-dah-DUH?

Sunday, Feb. 18, 1990 - As a student of letters to the editor over the years, I have detected two themes that have survived intact through national vicissitudes ranging from economic dislocation to political realignment. As examples of a sure thing, they're right up there with death and taxes.

One is the decennial complaint about calling years ending in zero the start of a new decade ratherthan the end of an old one. The other is the periodic agitation to jettison "The Star-Spangled Banner" in favor of a national anthem that doesn't split one's tonsils in the singing of it.

Regarding the former, I feel for these people, but I can't reach them. They're right, of course, but so was Galileo right when he verified the Copernican theory of planetary movement around the sun.

All it got him at the time was a guest spot at the Inquisition.

I classify the end-of-the-decade crowd with the grammarians who bleat futilely about splitting infinitives or the regrettable tendency to make verbs out of nouns, as in, "This deal has been leveraged to the hilt," or, "We're going to leaflet, and after that we'll vigil."

The second category has me worried, though, especially when it gets to the public opinion-poll stage. I happen to think we have a very serviceable national anthem. The verses were written under crisis conditions conducive to eloquent prose and poetry. The tune, based on "Anacreon in Heaven," an old English drinking song, has the lilt and sweep that such sublime stanzas deserve. I say keep it.

Ever one to hedge my bets, though, I'd like to submit a nomination in the event a pliant Congress yields to the importuning of the mob.

I suggest that words be fitted to some theme from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and this is not intended as snobbish elitism.

After all, there was a time, and not so long ago, when the opening strains of Beethoven's Fifth were as familiar to the U.S. public as the aforementioned national anthem or "God Bless America."

For those on the sunny side of 55, a little explanation may be in order.

Although separated by only a generation, World War I and World War II each had a U.S. theme word, for lack of a better term.

In World War I, this theme word was Liberty, and it appeared in such uses as Liberty Loan, referring to U.S. savings bonds, and the Liberty Engine, which powered the U.S.-built DeHavilland 4 airplane, the Liberty Plane.

The only application that survived into World War II was to mass-produced cargo vessels. Once a Liberty Ship, always a Liberty Ship.

In World War II, the theme word was Victory. The concept gained impetus, if not actual origin, with the spectacle of Prime Minister Winston Churchill extending pudgy digits in a V for Victory, his cigar at a defiant angle, the very epitome of British indomitability.

There were Victory Gardens, for the growing of produce at home. There was V-Mail, a species of microfilming that expedited the sending of mail to overseas military personnel. Seen almost as frequently as V for Victory was an interrupted line, dot-dot-dot-dash, which was the letter in International Morse Code.

Into this context, the Beethoven symphony fit like a huckster's dream. It was his fifth; Roman numeral V; V for Victory. Even more felicitous were the opening measures, resoundingly played by strings and clarinets: dah-dah-dah-DUH, dah-dah-dah-DUH, Morse Code for the letter V.

Little wonder that America clasped this work to its heart as the Victory Symphony.

There was also a touch of delicious irony in the fact that Beethoven was German. But music knows few political or ideological boundaries, as witness the "capture" of the haunting German ballad "Lili

Marlene" by British forces in North Africa, who made the lady by the lamppost their own symbol of wartime lonesomeness.

The universality of Beethoven's Fifth was never better demonstrated than by the halftrack driver in my rifle squad during the last weeks of the fighting in Europe. Stout fellow and fine soldier that he was, this driver was not your basic symphony buff, and he probably couldn't have told an arpeggio from an archipelago.

But he did discover that by rhythmically jamming his gearshift into the four forward speeds without benefit of clutch, he could replicate the G, E-flat, F and D of the opening bars of that symphony.

There were times the armored column was halted awaiting we knew not what, usually nothing, when the tension was broken by those "notes" issuing from the region of the engine.

Show me a transmission that can play the opening strains of Beethoven's Fifth and I'll show you a combat vehicle with heart.

So, if we need to change national anthems – and we needn't – let's at least choose something with a history.

Dah-dah-dah-DUH! Dah-dah-dah-DUH!

1949

The Mercury Herald revisited

Sunday, Sept. 3, 1989 - Everyone is entitled to a time warp now and then, especially anyone getting long of tooth and short of breath, as befits the Golden Years.

I'm not talking about simple nostalgia; I'm talking about the eerily detached feeling that comes when time and place seem suddenly and certifiably out of joint.

Like the feeling I had not long ago coming to work.

As days go, it was, well – average. Average spot in the parking lot: a bit far from the building, perhaps, but still in the same time zone. Average fumbling with the plastic ID card opening the security lock at the employees' entrance. Average look to the newsroom: carpeted floors, carefully-placed video terminals, scientifically designed light fixtures. Average level of activity: small clusters of people talking, the muted clicking of terminals, an occasional peal of raucous laughter. And not a whiff of nicotine.

But then, suddenly, it wasn't 1989 and I wasn't in the sprawling monolith that the Mercury News occupies on Ridder Park Drive.

It was 1949, and I was back at 211 W. Santa Clara St. in downtown San Jose, reporting for work at the Mercury Herald.

Quite a difference there. While newspapers themselves haven't changed all that much in 40 years, the places where they are produced have, and that considerably.

Much of the difference has to do with the transition from hot to cold type. The term "hot type" denotes the molten metal cast into lines of type by a machine with the felicitous brand name of Linotype.

"Cold type" refers to the photochemical process of producing printing plates, as well as to what some regard as a spiritual dimension of computers, which are at the heart of the whole operation.

Hot type meant typewriters and Teletypes and galley proofs and copy pencils and scissors and paste pots and cavernous wastebaskets and an aura that could belong only to a newspaper.

Cold type means video terminals and more video terminals.

Reporters write their stories on them. Foreign, national and state editors check incoming wire copy on them. Local editors rework cityside and regional stories on them. Copy editors compose headlines on them.

In the not-too-distant future, layout editors – who make a diagram of each page and are about the last functionaries routinely using paper – will be doing their work on them.

But in the dear, dead days of 1949, the newsroom still echoed to the clattering of manual typewriters: machines with substantial names – Royal, Underwood, Smith-Corona, Remington – appropriate to their rugged construction. Fewer women, more smokers.

Applying the time-warp concept, anyone from today walking in off the street – and in those days, anyone could and did walk in off the street – would have noticed two big differences from today's newsroom.

One was the scarcity of women; the other, the prevalence of smokers.

The Mercury Herald of that time could claim but three women on the main news staff. My boss, Central Coast Editor Thelma Miller, was one of them. A pleasant-faced, highly competent newspaperwoman, she had the editor's faculty for wielding an iron hand in a velvet glove.

The others were Anne Hitt, a talented young woman possessed of a dry wit – she covered Santa Clara, where she needed it – and Gene Plumb Mackie.

If those weren't pince-nez that Gene Mackie wore, they should have been, to complement her prim appearance and gracious manner. With her braided hair worn in a bun, she was the incarnation of the archetypal schoolmarm. Which was right, because she covered schools.

To be sure, there were women elsewhere – in the Society (with a capital S) department at the opposite end of the long newsroom; in the library, which was a far piece down the hall in the other direction; and in the advertising and business departments in other parts of the building.

As to smokers, they were everywhere. The aforementioned Mesdames Miller and Mackie were veritable chimneys. Silver-haired Phil Watson, the veteran courthouse reporter, was prone to forget the butts left glowing on the edge of his desk top. The result was an interesting pattern in bas-relief.

As a confirmed pipe smoker, I was happy as the proverbial clam, although I have yet to see a clam smoking a pipe.

As a member of the Central Coast staff, I was not, strictly speaking, a reporter; I was a correspondent, even though I came in to the office every night.

The Central Coast staff was the forerunner of the present bureaus. At the time, it consisted of a resident correspondent in Gilroy, who sent his copy up on the bus; a man covering Mountain View and Sunnyvale, who worked out of the San Jose office; and myself, covering the West Valley, which then was many orchards away from downtown San Jose.

There being fewer of them, the women staff members are easier to enumerate, but names and images of others crowd the memory. Many had well-known bylines at a time when bylines were given only sparingly: business writer Hal Martin; police reporter Dick Cox; dapper Joel Y. Rickman, nemesis of a county sheriff of the era; "Here 'Tis" columnist Frank Freeman; county reporter Wes Peyton – the list goes on.

For the local reporters, San Jose of 40 years ago was a "walking city" in the sense in which sociologists described 19th-century population centers where the access, if not the living, was easy.

Within the city limits, not yet distended by the annexation binges of the 1950s, the population was under 100,000. In the entire county, the 1950 census counted but 290,547 souls.

City council meetings? It was just a short walk to the ornate, 1890s City Hall at what is now Center Plaza at Market Street and Paseo de San Antonio. The police department was in the basement.

The county board of supervisors and planning commission were just three blocks away in the county buildings bounded by First, Market, St. James and St. John streets.

There was the courthouse; the Hall of Justice that housed the police court and a number of county offices; the Hall of Records that housed more county offices; and the County Jail, which also housed the sheriff's office.

They don't build jails like that one any more; they haven't since about 1870, when Santa Clara County's three-story, brick bastille was constructed along the lines of a haunted house in a gothic horror movie.

In fact, it was the horror factor – unspeakable goings-on after the metal door clanged shut for the night on the scores of occupants of the "big tank" – that led to a public outcry that resulted in the building of a new jail in 1958. That "new" jail is the one that's recently been replaced.

The new has become old, and in so short a time. It's enough to make one believe that a time warp really can occur.

It's 1989 again, but the eerily detached feeling is there, this time fueled by the realization that it's all ending.

Retirement. Time to hang up the green eyeshade and hunt for that pipe-smoking clam.

From typewriter to terminal, from walking city to megalopolis, they've been interesting years. Good ones, too; I'll miss this newsroom, whatever its era.

A SPIRITED EXCHANGE

Winchester, Masson look down on Valley

Sunday, Feb. 19, 1989 - The scene is in a back room of the cosmos where eparted spirits observe goings-on down on Earth. A little old lady is seated in a rocking chair. She is Sarah Winchester, of Mystery House fame.

SARAH: (Looking up to see Paul Masson standing beside her) Why, Paul, how nice to see you.

PAUL: Ah, Madame W. (A strange, grating sound is heard) What's that noise?

SARAH: Oh, it's probably poor Louis Pellier again.

PAUL: You mean old prune-face?

SARAH: Now, Paul, be nice. After all, he was responsible for bringing in Le petit prune d'Agen that made this the Valley of Heart's Delight. But now, poor dear, whenever someone calls his beloved orchards fruit farms, or talks about drying plums into prunes, he turns over in his grave. (Sighs) We call him Whirling Lou.

PAUL: Too bad about him. Should have diversified; gotten into avocados or something trendy.

Grapes, maybe. But prunes?

SARAH: Speaking of grapes, Paul, there's something I've wanted to ask you for a long time. There was this news story in a San Francisco paper about your mountain winery near Saratoga, and it said it was where "the Burgundy-born Paul Masson" began his wine-making career in 1852.

PAUL: (Nervously) That's what it said?

SARAH: Yes. But you were born in 1859, weren't you? I think that's terribly clever of you. Imagine! Prenatal wine.

PAUL: Prenatal wine, varietal wine; it's all part of the jargon. (Getting confidential) Actually, you know, I married the boss's daughter. And my boss had married the daughter of his boss, and that's the guy who started the grape thing in 1852. It was all in the family, you might say.

SARAH: Mm-m-m. Pret-ty thin, pret-ty thin to hang a date on. But tell me seriously, Paul, did you really say you'd sell no wine before its time?

PAUL: (Whooping and slapping his thigh) Hee-hoo! Oh, that Orson. He's a card, that Orson.

SARAH: Orson? Orson?

PAUL: The Welles kid. Histrionic. Give him a fortune cookie and he'll turn it into a

pageant.

SARAH: (Eyes narrowing) But did you say it?

PAUL: OK, OK. What I probably said was, "I will sell no wine." More likely, though, it came out something like, "Wine, schmine; who needs it?" See, I was pushing champagne at that time. Champagne and brandy. That's where the big bucks were. But what are you nailing me for, Sarah?

How about that circus they're running down at your old pad?

SARAH: Watch the familiarity, garcon. Maybe you were born in 1859, but I was born in 1837. So a little respect, s'il vous plait.

PAUL: Don't cloud the issue, er, Madame. I'm talking about that carnival they call the Winchester Mystery House. What's with the spirit talk? Did they really tell you that you'd live as long as you kept on building?

SARAH: Well, I hope you don't think I'm happy about what they're saying about little old Episcopalian me. As far as spirits go, I could take 'em or leave 'em. They weren't going to push me around.

PAUL: But 160 rooms. How do you explain 160 rooms? Who told you to build 160 rooms?

SARAH: Potato chips.

PAUL: I beg your pardon?

SARAH: Potato chips.

PAUL: I guess I'm not hearing too good. I thought you said potato chips.

SARAH: I did. Haven't you ever eaten a potato chip? Only you don't stop at just one; you keep eating one right after another. You just can't stop.

PAUL: Um-m-m-m, I s'pose.

SARAH: Well, it was that way with my house. I started out having one room added, and it was so much fun, I added another, and another and . . .

PAUL: OK, OK, before you knew it, you'd . . .

SARAH: . . . hit 160 rooms. Exactly. Everyone should have a hobby. Mine just happened to be building.

PAUL: I s'pose. Let's see, you did have a thousand dollars a day to play with, didn't you?

SARAH: (Stiffly) I don't know if play is the right word. I kept a lot of people busy. I didn't spend it on, hm-m-mf-f, champagne. (The sound of Louis Pellier revolving is heard.) Oh, dear, it's poor Louis again. And it always seems to be worse this time of year, when we get into blossom time. (Carried away by her thoughts) Ah, blossom time. Acres and acres and acres of white blooms . . .

PAUL: More like miles and miles and miles, stretching across the valley. Magnifique! In France, nothing to compare with it. Nothing! I should applaud my fellow countryman, not make fun of him.

SARAH: And these people now; they'll never know what it was like. Never. That beautiful, lovely, lost valley. Changed beyond recognition.

PAUL: Do you suppose there's something we could do to bring it back? How about a first-class haunting? Scare some people off.

SARAH: You're talking about a wild-ghost chase if you mean my house. There's not enough going on there to startle a nervous paranoiac with the DTs. What about your place? That old stone building where you began your wine-making career in – heh, heh – 1852 is kind of spooky.

PAUL: Nah. Zilch. Dullsville. I was counting on you. (Louis Pellier is heard again.) Hm-m-m, oh, well. (in a tone of weary resignation) Uh, Louis, mind if we join you?

PONDERING THE QUESTION

What have I done with my life?

Sunday, Aug. 28,1988 - One of the big drawbacks about getting old is that everyone does it. There's no exclusivity. No cachet. No way to be original.

And it's sneaky; it can't be headed off.

There you are, doing things just as you've always done them – and expect to keep doing them – and, whammo!

Some sly, metaphysical legerdemain having to do with numbers or the passage of time occurs, and there you are: statutorily, irrevocably, irredeemably old.

You don't feel any different, but it's right there in the Big Book. You are by gosh old.

Perhaps the most pernicious feature, though, is self- appraisal, as in "What have I done with my life?"

I was brooding over all this as threescore years and five sneaked by, when suddenly I was aware of a familiar presence: Sam.

Sam – for Subliminal Argumentative Mouthing – is the kind of inner voice I think plagues most people. He's the one who comes up with the witty riposte – half an hour late; with the admonition to keep one's mouth shut – right after shooting it off foolishly; with a key question to ask a witness – after the trial is over.

He also is maddeningly adroit at deflating the ego.

" 'You are old, Father William,' the young man said," Sam singsonged.

I can quote poetry, too. "The best is yet to be," I recited mawkishly. "The last of life, for which the first was made."

Sam snorted. "Well," he harrumphed, "whatever it was you intended to do with your life, it's too late. You're old. Says so right here."

"Oh, I don't know," I chirped. "Victor Hugo was hitting his stride when he was pushing 70. The composer Richard Strauss lived to 85 and was turning out pretty decent stuff almost up to his death.

And there was . . . "

"Victor Hugo you ain't," interrupted Sam, "and as for music, you even have trouble operating a player piano. But your good intentions mean nothing; what have you accomplished so far?"

"Well," I said defensively, "as a newspaperman, a certain amount of my stuff has found its way into print."

Sam snorted again. "It was well and truly stated by a late guru of your craft, Mr. Heywood Broun, that writing for a newspaper is like spitting in Niagara Falls. I'm talking about permanence. What will you be remembered by?"

A happy thought struck me. "I'm a collector," I said. "I will be recognized for my, ah, eclectic collection."

"When collections like yours get recognized," growled Sam, "they get abated. I assume you're referring to that Model 5 Linotype gathering dust and rust in your garage?"

"Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time," I murmured. "I was trying to push this school museum idea, and . . . "

"And that hunk of scrap metal next to it?" Sam persisted.

"A Chandler & Price job press," I explained. "It'll take a bit of work to fix up, but when you need one, you need it bad."

"The same way," Sam said cruelly, "as one would need a coffin, one of which you also happen to have?"

"A stage prop," I said quickly, "but useful. Very useful."

"I'd just as soon not get into that," said Sam, "but it brings up a related, though rhetorical, question about what kind of person would keep a human skeleton in the living room. Where do you dig up that kind of stuff?"

"From a doctor's office, by way of an antique shop," I replied hastily. "We had never met socially. At least I don't think so."

"And speaking of the macabre," said Sam, "what about those pieces of old airplanes hanging here and there?'

"From the Golden Age of Flying," I beamed proudly. "Aviation's era of wooden ships and iron men."

"Iron persons," corrected Sam, adding, sotto voce, "Sexist pig." Aloud, he asked, "What's the rationale for that broken down projector from the movie theater?"

"It only needs a couple of gears," I said patiently. "Meanwhile, it's a conversation piece. In fact, it's started a couple of conversations already."

"Very cerebral ones, I'm sure," said Sam, "such as begin with a gasp of 'What's that?' You must get about the same reaction with that locomotive headlight that burns whale oil."

"It fills an awkward space," I said, beginning to tire of this relentless inquest. "It was that or a vase.

Personally, I prefer locomotive headlights. My wife went along with it."

"Your wife," Sam said slowly, "has to go along with a lot. What, in heaven's name, is the point of all this? Why do you do it? Who cares anything about this stuff?"

"Old people care," I said quietly.

History eases the Valley blues

Sunday, Oct. 25, 1987 -
Misanthropy comes easily in the Valley of Heart's Delight.

My ordinarily benevolent regard for the human race starts curling up at the edges when I have to wait several minutes to back out of the driveway onto what used to be a sparsely traveled country road.

The malaise is massaged – and not gently – by passing vistas of shopping centers, fast-food emporia and the numbing sameness of Silicon Valley architecture (whose idea was it to call them business parks?).

At such times, a history fix is indicated; a fast nostalgia injection; some kind of reassurance that there was at least protoplasmic life in the valley before the invention of the silicon chip.

A spell of such relief came recently with a phone call from San Jose historian Clyde Arbuckle, the man with the 512K memory.

"Do you know who America's first ace was?" he asked.

I love questions like that.

Ask about Cabinet officers or Supreme Court justices and I'll nervously change the subject. But query me on something useless, like how many victories "Saxon Max" Immelmann racked up by the time of his demise in 1916, and you'll get a fast answer.

"Douglas Campbell," I said. Smug, maybe, but correct.

Arbuckle seemed only slightly surprised that I knew. Actually, he was calling to advise me of a human interest story which, it happened, I'd written about back in 1976. But the topic of the schoolteacher and the ace is ripe for updating.

It involves two Douglas Campbells – not related – and their connection with Mount Hamilton.

The first Douglas Campbell was born in San Francisco in 1896 and spent his boyhood on Mount Hamilton, where his father was director of Lick Observatory. Later, W.W. Campbell was president of the University of California.

Young Douglas went off to prep school and Harvard, and from there off to war, signing on with the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps, forerunner of the U.S. Air Service of World War I. He wound up with the 94th Aero Squadron, an outfit whose name is writ large in the annals of U.S. military aviation.

The events of April 14, 1918, have a familiar ring to anyone who savors early-day flying stories: how Lts. Campbell and Alan Winslow were left on standby duty at the 94th's field at Toul, France, while Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker and two other pilots went out on patrol; how word came through that two German planes had crossed the lines nearby; how Campbell and Winslow climbed into their Nieuport 28s and within minutes were engaging the enemy.

They got their targets, a Pfalz and an Albatros. Historical accounts differ as to whose opponent was first to fall, but in his 1976 interview, Campbell deferred to Winslow. Out of the corner of his eye, he said, he saw his wing-mate's adversary hit the ground first.

Campbell's combat career was short-lived but illustrious. On June 6, 1918, he was wounded in the back by a fragment of an apparently explosive bullet. Although able to nurse his plane back 15 miles to the field, he was out of action for the remaining months of the war.

But in just under eight weeks, he had scored six victories (six downed planes), an ace plus one.

While other American pilots had attained the requisite five victories before he did, Campbell was the first product of U.S. flying schools to earn the distinction. He was, in a strict sense, the first American ace.

After the war, Campbell followed a business career, becoming an executive with W.R. Grace & Co.

For many years he was vice president and general manager of Pan American Grace Airways.

The other Douglas Campbell, 47, is a native of San Jose and graduate of San Jose State College, where he also earned a master's degree in education.

He presides over the one-room school atop Mount Hamilton, where children of Lick Observatory employees make up the 16-member student body. A part-time teacher, Jill Owens, takes care of kindergarten, first grade and some social studies, Campbell said, so it's considered a 1 1/2-teacher school.

Drawing on the analogy of his namesake predecessor on the mountain, Campbell allowed as how teaching in this one-room school "is kind of like flying solo at 4,000 feet," that being the elevation of the observatory.

One could extend the imagery. For instance, the wood-and-wire crates of World War I were notoriously free of extra gadgets. Their instruments advised a pilot of his altitude, airspeed and compass heading, and disclosed minimal information about the state of the engine. Everything else – and that was a lot – was up to the pilot.

And so it is, in a way, with a one-room school. The duties of office staff, custodian, nurse, psychologist, special resource personnel, and a myriad of other functions, are all up to the teacher.

Campbell noted that this affords an opportunity for one to draw on a lot of the training, which, though required for a credential, might otherwise go unused, unless for a special assignment in a large school.

But Campbell says he likes the variety, the challenge and the sense of fulfillment at a one-room school.

Both his children, Monica, 15, and Richard, 19, are Mount Hamilton graduates. "I feel that I'm a craftsman rather than a cookie-cutter. I can teach to the child, rather than teach to the test," Campbell said, referring to the current emphasis on statewide test scores. But, he observed, these same scores show up consistently above-average with the individualized attention the pupils get.

The two Douglas Campbells have maintained a correspondence for more than 10 years, ever since their mutuality of name and location was drawn to their attention.

In August, Campbell the ace, active and alert at 91, visited Campbell the schoolteacher, who lives in San Jose, some miles below the observatory. The older man was on one of his periodic trips from his home in Connecticut to the West Coast to see relatives. But he found time for a trip to the mountaintop and his old haunts.

The school is in a different building, but at the same location, and there is a tree still standing at the corner that Douglas Campbell, Class of '09, recalled from games of hide-and-seek.

Campbell the teacher has kept some of the materials that date back to the era of Campbell the ace, who was especially interested to see maps that he remembered, showing a canal-less Isthmus of Panama, and Arizona and New Mexico as territories rather than states.

Now all this is what I call a history fix; a shot of pure nostalgia; an antidote for misanthropy.

The cars can glut the erstwhile country roads and the "business parks" can go on looking like Incan rejects.

But the imagination has been sent on flights of fancy that come down to Earth with tangible evidence of reality, and the human race seems not so bad after all.

S.J. proposals keep historical cycle on line

Sunday, Oct. 5, 1986 - Vibrant, dynamic Silicon Valley may not yet be a cliche in itself, but it is living proof of at least one trite expression, namely: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

One could cite the proposal for a new downtown San Jose City Hall, an issue that has worked its way from rear to front burner and just may stay there this time.

Based on past experience, though, the odds on the seat of municipal government being moved a mile and a half back down the road seem about equal to the chances of Reid-Hillview Airport being enlarged for jumbo jets.

The return of city hall has been a recurring theme ever since the present one opened in 1958.

Through it all has run a thread of guilt, a suggestion that maybe the body politic, through its minions, did the downtown dirt by pulling up stakes just when that area needed all the help it could get.

And did it need help.

In the early 1950s, the county began the transfer of all its non-court functions from downtown to the present civic center. In the mid-1950s, Valley Fair opened its regional shopping center, delivering a body blow to the downtown department stores and shopping area generally. Then toward the end of the decade, city hall shut down.

By the time the Mercury News twisted the knife with its departure from Santa Clara Street early in 1967, things were getting pretty seedy along the main stem.

It's true that, as buildings go, the city didn't suffer great loss with the demise of the old city hall.

Unless one was incurably sentimental, and there were a few such, the gloomy pile of masonry had outlived its usefulness. As for design, visitors could be forgiven for assuming that the late Sarah Winchester was in charge.

For its time, though -- 1889 -- the city Hall was a rather distinctive public edifice. In its own way it was, well, rather distinctive. If buildings could, in any way, be said to partake of human characteristics, city hall was a sort of architectural Howard Jarvis.

A new downtown city hall? Perhaps. A revitalized retail and commercial district? It's on the way.

And just to keep the historic cycle going, here's Valley Fair gussying up its premises something fierce, in plenty of time to give San Jose's new downtown something to think about all over again.

So what else is new?

Well, there's the latest transit study, for a rail line from downtown San Jose to Campbell and Los Gatos.

This one really hurts. It's not that it's a bad idea; quite the contrary. But the concept carries the seeds of its own defeat. It's too practical. It makes too much sense. There's already track there, and has been for 108 years.

If this sounds like terminal cynicism, consider what happened in San Francisco. Or what didn't happen.

As anyone who has ever taken the train to that city knows, the depot there is less than a paragon of convenience. Fourth and Townsend -- and before that, Third and Townsend -- is a good mile from most commuter destinations, such as the financial district.

For years, there had been talk of bringing the rail line into the heart of town as a means of getting people off the freeways and into mass transit.

Then, a few years ago, there was a glimmer of hope. Nothing fancy; no multimillion-dollar construction; they'd just line a few switches. Trains that ordinarily would stop at Fourth and Townsend would be sent on down the Embarcadero as far as the Ferry Building at the foot of Market Street.

It seems the track had been there all the time.

In a burst of what proved to be pathetic optimism, CalTrain, the joint-powers agency operating the Peninsula commuter service, actually listed three arrivals per morning at the Ferry Building, in a timetable dated April 24, 1983.

True, there was a notation: "Proposed service. Commencement date to be announced." But for a few mad moments one could believe in the tooth fairy, in the breaking of bureaucratic barriers, in the actual trial of an inexpensive, common-sense idea.

So how many passenger trains ever made it past Fourth and Townsend? It is to laugh.

The lesson for the San Jose-Campbell-Los Gatos rail planners is obvious. Wait until the present track has been paved over or built over. That's the time for a survey.

This is probably being a little hard on some well-meaning public officials. There has to be another factor hidden in there somewhere, such as the Southern Pacific railroad, which in many ways is as obdurate as when crusty old Collis P. Huntington was calling the turns.

Meanwhile, we'll have the old streetcars back downtown, which is a comforting thought, and that's not intended as sarcasm.

There's something solid and reassuring about the rumbling of a streetcar, just as there is with the patient clanking of a windmill, or the steady purring of a distant tractor discing an orchard, sounds that are rarely if ever heard anymore in these parts.

Even though they'll be serving the useful purpose of taking shoppers through the revitalized downtown, the old streetcars nevertheless represent the Tom Sawyer approach to city planning.

Tom, it will be remembered from Mark Twain's story, faced the onerous task of whitewashing the fence. But by suggesting to his friends that whitewashing called for artistic talent rather than being just a chore, he got them to do all the work and pay him for the privilege.

And so with the streetcars. As long as they were the only available public transit, their faults were magnified. They were noisy, bulky, unadaptable to new routes and generally in the way.

Now, after an absence of nearly 50 years, they're quaint, picturesque, a nostalgic reminder of a less-hurried time.

We could do a lot worse, and have.

The final touch to the revitalized downtown will come when Car No. 124 of the old San Jose Railroads stops at the new city hall.

Pages from the past

Sunday, April 19, 1992 - The earliest lineal forebear of today's Mercury News was an unpretentious sheet called the San Jose Weekly Visitor that first saw the light of print at a time of profound municipal discontent.

The date was June 20, 1851. Only a few months earlier, San Jose had been stripped of its status as the first state capital, losing out to Vallejo.

Adding to the indignity was a drop in the city's 4,000-odd population, but that didn't prevent a triumvirate composed of J.C. Emerson, A. Jones (middle initials were sometimes a luxury) and J.F. Damon from becoming publishers.

Those were the days when, as the saying went, all it took to start a newspaper was a press and a shirttail full of type, the mid-19th century equivalent of a Macintosh. Typesetting machines -- or, to be more accurate, line-casting machines -- were still decades away, and anything appearing in print had to be set laboriously by hand.

Emerson, Jones and Damon acquired their equipment from a couple of short-lived publications, the Argus and the State Journal, that owed their existence and demise to the state capital and removal of same.

In San Francisco, the Alta California, one of the state's seminal journals, cast a kindly eye to the south and noted that the first issue of the Weekly Visitor" is very creditable in its typographical appearance."

"We heartily welcome our new laborer and wish it the highest success," the elder publication purred, with a benevolence born of confidence there never could be an overlap in circulation areas.

Readers today would be hard put to compliment the Weekly Visitor -- or any newspaper of the time -- on attractive typography. The front page was given over primarily to ads, and what news stories were there bore the most meager of headlines: label heads, as they're known in the trade. The really hard news was inside on Pages 3 and 4.

Perhaps the most bothersome feature, though, was the eye- squinting agate type used throughout.

The reason for this general unattractiveness was fairly obvious: newspapers -- and some magazines -- had no competition other than word of mouth when it came to disseminating information about local events.

Today, stories are evaluated for their relative news significance, and this determines their placement, as well as the headline size. In a sense, it's a process of merchandising the news.

The Weekly Visitor was scarcely more than a year old when it underwent its first changes, a new name -- the Santa Clara Register -- and a new editor, one F.B. Murdoch, whom publisher Emerson ecruited when Damon withdrew from the combine.

The Santa Clara designation referred to the county rather than city, the idea being to indicate identity with a wider area.

All was not well within the organization, however, and the aggressive Murdoch had soon shouldered Emerson into the No. 2 spot and then out altogether.

Murdoch also changed the name again, this time to the San Jose Telegraph, with Santa Clara Register appearing beneath in smaller type, beginning Nov. 3, 1853.

As the paper prospered, the size increased. For mechanical reasons, though, this was accomplished not by adding pages, but by increasing their dimensions. The so-called blanket pages eventually attained a size of 20 1/2 by 27 1/2 inches, compared with today's 14 1/2 by 23-inch size.

The first tentative step toward daily publication took place in the late 1850s when a semi-weekly was tried, but soon discontinued. One big factor was the labor involved in setting type by hand and then distributing it back into the cases after publication. A four-page paper used as many as 100,000 pieces of type.

The common practice among newspapers of this size was to print two pages at a time. Pages 1 and 4 would be printed together, then the sheets would be flipped over and run through the press again for Pages 2 and 3.

One result was that the first and last pages were customarily used for ads and filler material -- accounting for the hideous typography of Page 1 -- and the inside pages held the real news.

During these years, the appearance of newspapers was changing. Type for news stories, or body type, remained agonizingly small, but headlines became more elaborate. So elaborate, in fact, that in some cases almost the whole story was told in the main head and a series of sub-heads or decks, often running to several inches.

In 1860, Murdoch sold his interest to William N. Slocum, who had come to San Jose from Santa Cruz. Again there was a name change, this time to the enduring designation of San Jose Mercury. Actually it was the Telegraph and Mercury, but the Telegraph didn't last long. Mercury did.

Slocum's tenure was brief; on May 23, 1861, he sold the paper to James Jerome Owen, but not before he had taken soundings on the subject of publishing a daily. Whatever the reason -- start of the Civil War or public indifference -- nothing came of the prospectus Slocum had circulated.

One feature of page makeup, abandoned in San Jose only in recent years but still in use elsewhere, was the vertical column rule separating news stories. A thin strip of type metal, its printing edge was a fine line indeed. But placed in the page form upside down, the wider base became the printing surface, making a solid black border. These "turned rules" were used on occasions of national mourning, and the Mercury's front page was so adorned when President Lincoln was assassinated in 1865.

The new owner was the J.J. Owen who left an indelible mark on San Jose with his promotion of an electric light tower to illuminate the city from a single source.

The 200-foot iron structure straddled the Market-Santa Clara streets intersection from 1881 to 1915, when it collapsed in a wind storm.

Long before the tower, though, Owen was agitating for a daily paper, and he actually published one for three months starting in November 1861. But there was not enough advertising to warrant its continuance.

The next attempt lasted from August 1869 to April 1870. Between the latter date and March 1872, there was a flurry of activity involving the San Jose Patriot, an evening paper published by F.B. Murdoch, and an unsuccessful sheet called the Daily Guide.

Owen took over the Daily Guide, and on March 12, 1872, the daily San Jose Mercury appeared, as it has ever since.

By this time, San Jose boasted a population of 12,000, and the county 30,000. In December 1884, Owen sold the paper to Charles Shortridge, who had been publishing the Morning Times. The nameplate then read Times-Mercury, but was shortened back to Mercury when Shortridge sold the paper to F.A.

Taylor, who had been publishing another paper, the Republic.

The journalistic musical chairs continued, with the reappearance on the scene of Shortridge and the subsequent sale to a combine headed by Clarence M. Wooster and Alfred Holman.

The stage was being set for the closest thing to a newspaper dynasty San Jose would ever see. In December 1900, two Wisconsin brothers, Everis Anson Hayes and Jay Orley Hayes, both lawyers and iron mine owners, bought the struggling San Jose Evening Herald. The following August, they bought Holman's controlling interest in the Mercury.

They published the morning and evening papers from the same downtown building on Lightston Alley. In 1913 they merged the two as the morning San Jose Mercury Herald.

In 1942 the Hayes family corporation, by this time headed by the sons of E.A. and J.O. Hayes, acquired the San Jose Evening News, which had roots going back to the mid-1880s. Once again morning and evening papers were published under the same roof.

In June 1951, the 99th anniversary of the founding of the parent Weekly Visitor, the Herald was dropped and the morning paper's name reverted to the historic Mercury.

The second-generation publishers, Elystus L. Hayes and Harold C. Hayes, ran the operation until July 1952, when the papers were sold to Northwest Publications, the Ridder family organization, and Joseph B. Ridder took over as publisher.

In 1974, the papers merged with the Miami-based Knight Corporation to form Knight-Ridder Newspapers.

The last of the name changes occurred in 1983, when the morning Mercury and afternoon News became the Mercury News, with an all-day schedule of 10 editions.

Missing mates, marriage tests and memories

Sunday, March 24, 1991 - Folks, here's a party game that's not only fun to play but could prove to be the best test of marriage durability this side of an overlooked wedding anniversary.

It's called Delineate Your Mate, and the element of surprise is essential.

Without any warning whatever, men are herded into one room and women into another. Each is provided with pencil and paper and told to write down a description of his or her mate, or Significant Other, such as would be needed for a missing-person report.

After everyone's finished, a hilarious time can be had by all when the descriptions are read before the reassembled gathering and people try to match them up with the subjects.

The idea for this came to me with terrifying suddenness when, for a few mad moments, I thought it was happening for real.

My wife and I were driving to the Monterey Peninsula to celebrate our 39th wedding anniversary – which we'd both remembered – and stopped off in Santa Cruz, where she wanted to check out a couple of funky shops, as well as the bookstore.

I wandered around, ogling the downtown rebuilding and keeping an eye on the time. We were to meet at the bookstore, then go on to a restaurant just outside town to join some friends for dinner.

Came the appointed hour and she wasn't at the bookstore. I swung around to one of the funky shops. No luck.

At that point, a familiar version of a mental videotape kicked in, a flight of fancy in which I spin out dialogue with imaginary or real characters about problems bothering me at the time.

This time the subject was a missing wife, and I was at police headquarters. Details of her name, age and hair color were no problem, and I even volunteered her Social Security number, which I had memorized.

Then things started going downhill.

"Height?"

"Uh, well, I guess I don't know in feet and inches, but she comes up about to my nose. Or maybe it's my chin. Depends if I'm looking up or down."

"Weight?"

"Gee, I'm afraid you've got me there,

too. Well, I mean she dresses with real flair; I've seen people stop her on the street and compliment her. But, well, the things she wears, she could weigh a lot more or a lot less and you really wouldn't know. I mean she's extremely attractive; well, beautiful, and . . . " "Eyes?"

"Yes. Two."

"I mean the color."

"Uh, um, I guess it's been a while. Let's see, they're sort of bluish brown. Or maybe they're brownish blue. Well, see, they don't exactly leap out at you."

"That's fortunate."

"I mean color-wise. They're like, well, neutral. Yes, I'd say a definite shade of neutral."

"Can you describe what she was wearing?"

"Well, let's see, it was sort of dark-colored . . . "

"Dress? Skirt? Suit? Jumpsuit?"

"Well, she was wearing a skirt, I know that. But I sort of remember something on her legs besides stockings. And there was something with a pattern. I remember a sort of pattern. Only it was kind of subdued."

"You mean it didn't exactly leap out at you?"

"Yes. That's it exactly. It was just sort of, well, sort of there."

"Like her eyes."

"Her eyes? Oh, heh heh, yes; her eyes. Touche."

"What about jewelry? Earrings? Necklace? Bracelets?"

"Uh, well, she almost always wears earrings. I'd say earrings are definitely a safe bet, but I couldn't describe them. I'm not so sure about a necklace; I think she was wearing something else around her throat, though. I seem to remember a dash of color of some kind. Could have been blue. Or maybe it was red. Or yellow . . ."

"Yes, the colors are easily confused."

At this point, my wife mercifully appeared, looking exactly as I'd described her to the imaginary desk sergeant. She'd been at the other funky shop, the one I hadn't checked.

I suppose there's a moral lurking about somewhere, only I'm not sure I want to find it. Probably something about taking people for granted; looking without seeing and all that.

At the same time, though, I'd argue that it's possible physical appearance and the recollection of same aren't all that important.

I may be a little shaky on the matter of eye coloring, but I could go into a lot of detail about the kind of person my wife is; for instance, how she really cares about people. I can't tell one style of dress from another, but I could draw up a lengthy list of extra-thoughtful things that she's done for me and for others over the years.

But details like that wouldn't cut much ice with the desk sergeant.

(Note: After it was all over, I asked my wife just exactly what she had been wearing. It was as follows: a tobacco-colored velour dress over black satin pants; antique paisley shawl; a Carter Smith tie-dyed scarf; antique silver earrings from India; silver-colored shoes. And no, I don't want to play any stupid game.)

Good old bad guy

Sunday, April 6, 1986 -

Connoisseurs of the endings of eras have had a lot to talk about with the death of James Cagney, the feisty screen hero who elevated roguish pugnacity to an art form.

His laurels were well-earned; we indeed shall not look upon his like again.

Nor shall we look again upon the cinematic genre peopled by the James Cagneys of the industry. To be sure, we can see the movies again, on the late-late show or on videotape, and we can savor the artistry of the man, but something essential to the mystique is missing.

We're talking vintage Cagney here, as in "The Picture Snatcher" (tough newspaper photographer), or "Here Comes the Navy" (wise guy enlisted man), or "Ceiling Zero" (hard-as- nails commercial pilot), or "G-Men" (ditto FBI agent). And we're talking pre-teen audiences. But most of all, we're talking Saturday matinees.

I suppose any current movie – or are they all films now? – shown on a Saturday afternoon is, per se, a Saturday matinee. But, and pardon my nostalgia, the showing itself, followed immediately by another and then another, is not an event such as it was in the 1930s.

In those Depression days, the only movie house in the West Valley was the Premier Theater in Los Gatos, where the present theater is on Santa Cruz Avenue. The Campbell Theater didn't make its appearance – in a former bank – for a couple of years, and the now-departed Saratoga Theater didn't come along until 1947.

There might be a few adults in the crowd that milled around the entrance as the magic hour of 2 p.m. approached, but mostly it was kids. Very vocal kids. I believe the admission price was a dime, but whatever the amount, it wasn't readily available in the family coffers, or from my earnings as a purveyor – "boy salesman" was the euphemism – of Liberty magazine, at a commission of 1 1/2 cents per copy, going door-to-door once a week.

That's where the passes came in. Or we came in with passes.

As editor of the weekly Mail-News and Star, my dad was making what might generously be described as a modest salary, but newspapers do – or did – get passes. Consequently, my brother and I managed to get to about every Saturday matinee we dared to, despite the inevitable protest of the manager, who never seemed to think much of the arrangement.

Inside, the din of a hundred or so young voices subsided as the house lights went down, then the decibel level picked up again, with whoops and clapping, as the visage of Mickey Mouse grinned out from the screen. For the next two hours we were, quite literally, transported.

The movies we saw might not hold the attention of an audience of comparable age today. They were, to be brutally candid, corny. And, with rare exceptions, there wasn't much violence.

Correction: There was violence, but not with the documentary realism that hardens our sensibilities in today's film and video fare.

Punches were thrown. People got shot. But realistic as it may have seemed to an uncritical, largely prepubescent audience, it still was in another dimension, in an environment that existed totally apart from our milieu of orchards and small towns. If there was evil, there was also honest retribution. The good guys prevailed. The bad guys either got theirs or were made to look totally ridiculous.

Movies were, after all, intended as an escape. This was the Depression, and people wanted to see the happy ending they weren't so sure of achieving themselves.

Action. Romance. Spectacle. Cagney & Co. provided it with flair and, in his case, a finesse that later critics acknowledged transcended the often mediocre vehicles in which he was cast.

"Here Comes the Navy" was nobody's idea of a film classic, but it had some priceless footage of a prominent neighbor, the dirigible USS Macon, and a thrilling re-creation of an actual episode that occurred with its sister ship, the Akron.

That was when a young sailor who had been hanging on to a mooring rope didn't let go in time and got carried aloft. They finally were able to pull him aboard, but not before a lot of hearts were pounding in an equal number of throats.

"Ceiling Zero" might never have been in Oscar contention, but could anyone escape goose pimples at hearing the ominous message from the ground crackling through the radio of a fog- enveloped airliner (we called them transports then): "Visibility, zero. Ceiling, zero."

Who could land the crate under such conditions? Cagney, that's who.

We'd leave the theater and, for a few histrionic moments, be the people just seen on the screen. But those people were from another dimension, another plane of existence. We left them and their world inside and returned to our own.

It's different now. If you see a sadistic moron on the screen, then there's a chilling possibility that his counterpart could be the guy who pulls alongside you at an intersection some midnight and fires a shotgun into your face.

If you see a destructive rampage on the screen, be it an individual or group of individuals, rest assured the milieu is ours, all ours, and not something created on a Hollywood back lot.

But Cagney & Co. gave us the luxury of escape, and for that we will forever be in their debt.

Escape from the Silicon Valley

Sunday, Dec. 15, 1985 - A talented colleague, columnist H. Bruce Miller, has forsaken the Babylonian glitter of Silicon Valley for the pure air and wholesome guilelessness of Bend, Ore.

Although our paths rarely crossed, and we had at best only a nodding acquaintance, professionally I'm sorry to see Miller go. He is a good writer and his barbs were usually well-aimed. We need people like that.

I infer from his column that the forces of repulsion and attraction were about equal. That is, I question whether he would have been attracted to Bend if he felt the situation in the Valley wasn't hopeless. I also think it likely he would have gritted his teeth and endured the local rat race if he hadn't found a place as desirable as Bend.

At least that's my surmise.

Which reminds me of my dad.

Almost 65 years ago, he rode his Columbia chainless bicycle down from Berkeley, where he was assistant editor of the Daily Gazette, to size up the village of Saratoga as a place to pursue his journalistic dream of publishing a country weekly.

He followed through on this ambition and, although the enterprise did not prosper, it was a good move. He continued in newspaper work on a Los Gatos weekly, later became Saratoga postmaster and lived his life as a useful and respected citizen of a small town.

In his case, it was more attraction than repulsion. Berkeley in the early 1920s was a pleasant university and residential community; hardly the kind of place from which one would seek to escape.

Saratoga, on the other hand, was definitely rural and, in addition to enjoying rare beauty of setting, was a good place for living on a shoestring. I spent my earliest years in a house on the edge of an orchard where my parents paid rent of $15 a month. A few years later they bought a lot near the Village and built a two-story house for something like $5,000.

What's happened to Saratoga property values since then is the stuff of wrist-slashing.

But there is a discernible parallel here, even though skewed by more than 60 years of changing social conditions. The analogy runs something like this: Find the Shangri-La, the Camelot, the Brigadoon – the Bend, Ore. – and unless it is Shangri-La, or Camelot, or Brigadoon, the chances are that someone else has found it, too. One doesn't have to draw diagrams to complete the scenario.

I don't know what's going on in central Oregon, and it may be that, for Bend, the same kinds of forces that transformed the Santa Clara Valley are many years down the pike, if they exist at all.

But I wouldn't count on it; there are too many case histories, and more are coming. I get nervous in the Napa Valley. I come close to panic at San Juan Bautista.

When it comes to that amorphous attribute known as quality of life, I would much prefer to live in the Santa Clara Valley of the 1930s or 1940s. But I'd be hard put to circle a date and say that things went all downhill after that point. Was it when Macys spurred the exodus from downtown? When the Ford plant opened? The Lockheed plant? IBM? Pick a year; any number can play.

I don't like nursing my car along at 5 mph on a clogged freeway, any more than I like seeing that layer of dirty, brown air hovering over the valley while driving over the grade from Santa Cruz.

Nor am I attracted by the "consumerist ethic" that Miller found so pervasive. His litany of complaints was right on, and I can't argue with his choices.

But Miller and I see the same things differently. What he perceives as essence, I regard as an overlay. A very thick overlay, to be sure, but still not entirely obscuring the valley that used to be, which was a pretty good place to live.

There is indeed a brittleness and superficiality – not Miller's words, but I think he'd agree – to life in Silicon Valley's fast lane, and the fast lane seems to be wherever the traffic hasn't slowed to 5 mph during rush hour. There is stupidity and meanness of spirit; there is crowding; there are extremes of opulence and want. There are, in short, all the conditions you'd expect to find when almost a million and a half people are poured into a valley that not too many years ago was largely populated by trees.

But among those million and a half are people who genuinely care about the place where they live, and who spend their time and substance trying to make it better. They've always been around; now there are a whole lot more of them.

For instance, even the most enthusiastic San Jose-basher – and believe me, I have sat in the seat of the scornful – has to acknowledge a subculture of culture hereabouts.

Sure, we all know San Jose: the city that knows how – to foul up. The definitive Slurbia; home of the $60 million bond debacle; builder of a glitzy theater where the ceiling promptly collapsed (boy, couldn't the current City Hall critics have done a number in 1972 on that one).

But there's also San Jose of the increasingly important symphony; the resident theatrical company; the art museum, the first-rate historical museum; the opera institute. Throw in a poetry society or two, assorted artists, sculptors, writers, photographers – not exactly your basic cultural wasteland.

It's a pattern repeated all over the valley. You can't go from one town to another without tripping over the creative efforts of this organization or that. True, some of these outfits take their lumps in the columns of this newspaper, but that hardly detracts from the validity of their contribution, to participants and spectators alike.

The people who make the arts go aren't in it for the money. Neither are those who are caught up in ecological projects, or historic preservation, or working with the homeless, or any of a score of similar activities.

They're in it because it's something they like to do, and they represent as significant a stratum in this valley of frantic strangers as those whose lives revolve around the work place-shopping mall axis decried by Miller.

To use a hoary but apt phrase, I don't dig the whole Silicon Valley scene. As to the fast lane and related adornments, I share the sentiment attributed to Abraham Lincoln in another context: "For people who like this sort of thing, this is about the sort of thing they'd like."

Still, there's enough around here that I do dig to keep me interested. It may not be Shangri-La or Camelot, but it's sure enough tangible.

How I learned to live with the bomb

Sunday, Aug.4, 1985 - Forty years after the event, I still can't summon from any emotional or intellectual depths that sense of moral outrage and despair that accompanies much of today's discussion about unleashing nuclear warfare on the world.

I wish we did not have to live under the threat of nuclear annihilation. I would like to think that my children and my children's children unto all generations could enjoy this Earth, as it has been my privilege to do.

I wish fervently that the world's leaders could find in their hearts the wisdom, the compassion, the understanding to see the arms race for what it is: unadulterated madness.

Still, hovering in the vicinity of the bottom line – a term that I don't think had been coined by 1945 – is the disturbing question of whether we, the United States, should have dropped the atom bomb.

For my part, this is where terminal ambivalence sets in, because I honestly doubt whether I'd be here if it hadn't been for that bomb. The same could be said for a few hundred thousand others.

I see it as analogous to the situation of a couple, married for many years, who have raised outstanding children and yet reach the conclusion that, as marriage partners, they were mismatched from the start. "We never should have gotten married," they agree.

And yet, to say that is to say inferentially that their children never should have been born.

Similarly, to say that we should have withheld use of atomic weapons is to say inferentially that World War II should not have ended when it did.

My own feelings are colored by the fact that my division, the 20th Armored, was ticketed for the invasion of the main island of Japan.

That much was certain. The bit about being on the point – as in "hit the beach" – may have been a latrine rumor. If it were so, however, then, as a rifleman in an armored infantry battalion, my prospects wouldn't have been such as to gladden the heart of an insurance underwriter. Or mine either, for that matter.

Up to this time, I had seen combat, but mainly in the spectator sense. The 20th Armored, activated as a training division in 1943 to furnish replacements to divisions already overseas, wasn't assigned a combat mission until late 1944.

We arrived in France in mid-February of 1945, some eight months after the Normandy invasion and several weeks after the Battle of the Bulge, Germany's last-ditch offensive. At first, it appeared we would serve only as occupation troops. Then orders came to move into Germany, which we did in early April, proceeding southward.

For about three weeks it was a Cook's tour of conflict, a Disneyland of defeat. The evidence of recent carnage alternated with vistas of sturdy survival. There were burned-out tanks and wheeled vehicles, crashed airplanes, towns reduced to rubble where the atmosphere was heavy with the smell of death. But there were also cities that were still intact, where civilian activity seemed to have been put on perpetual hold; prosperous-looking farms, where elemental soil-replenishment was evident by its odor; picturesque villages, where low-arched, medieval gates snapped the antennas off halftracks whose radio operators had been careless enough to leave them waving.

Things came to a focus in brief but savage encounters outside Munich, in places where the Schutzstaffel, better known as the SS troops, were not about to concede that the Third Reich was kaputt.

This was where the 20th Armored suffered practically all of its casualties – 43 dead, 130 wounded – numbers of tragic import to families, but low on the scale of Army-wide figures.

Since the division was split into three combat commands, not everyone got into the scrap. My platoon was among the lucky ones.

We had a couple of nighttime strafings, some shell bursts in the vicinity, some snipers down the line. But we weren't called upon for any sustained fire fight, or to heave grenades in a house-to-house advance, or to fix bayonets for hand-to-hand fighting as we had been primed for one terrible night at the end of April.

We simply lucked out, and in a few days the war in Europe was over.

No one questioned or objected to the news that we were to be sent home in July. There still was a war going on in the Pacific and we knew that was where we were headed – the invasion angle wasn't revealed until later. We were still a relatively green outfit; the combat-weary divisions would be left behind for the European occupation.

Meanwhile, there was a 30-day overseas furlough at home, with accompanying gas-rationing coupons, and nobody bothered to look beyond that.

We were a couple of days out of New York when news of the Hiroshima bombing was announced aboard the S.S. John Ericsson, a luxury liner-turned-troopship. The announcement of the Nagasaki bombing was obscured in the excitement of arrival at New York and the almost immediate boarding of trains to go home. For me, it was the peaceful Santa Clara Valley and the even more peaceful town of Saratoga.

I got home on a Monday. The next day, I was lounging in my room when someone started ringing the bell at the Federated Church, about a block away. My mother came in.

"It's over, Will," she said. "You won't have to go back."

It took a while for everything to sink in. My immediate reaction was one of sadness for those who had been killed, a lot of them my friends. And the war had lasted a long, long time.

By the time the invasion news was bandied about it was entirely academic, as we were simply marking time in garrison until discharged "at the convenience of the government" in lieu of the point system then in effect. Under the point system, total service and combat time were reckoned in a formula that assured those who had seen the most action would get out the quickest. And under that system, I could have been in the Army for quite a while.

The really gutty questions have come up mainly in recent years, as this weapon that was introduced 40 years ago to end a particular conflict grew into the principal stumbling block in the survival of the human race.

Were the Japanese on the verge of surrender before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Would the war have ended anyway, short of actual invasion? If the United States had not used the bomb, would it have been introduced in the future by some other power – terrorists, even – in a more frightening context? And is the power of the atom something that can be really be kept secret?

I don't even guess at the answers, if there are any. But 40 years later, I find it difficult to fault crusty Harry Truman for his decision to loose this awesome genie. It cost many lives and it saved many. When mine was likely one of the latter, I'm hard put to pass judgment.

Happy 50th year in the "profession," Willys.

Intrepid reporter started journey 50 years ago

Gold symbolism may have something to do with it, but 50-year anniversaries always seem to pack a special significance. At least that's the case with me and the one coming up Sept. 1: 50 years since starting as west valley correspondent for the *San Jose Mercury Herald*, now *the Mercury News*.

The *Mercury Herald* maintained a Central Coast department with a net-

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work of correspondents covering outlying areas, from north to south county and sometimes beyond. These were mainly non-professionals, housewives or business people who wrote up local events and sent in their copy via Peerless or Greyhound bus. As "stringers," they were paid by the inch—15 cents—for published items pasted together monthly in—what else?—a string.

As a 1949 journalism graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, I spent that summer as Saratoga correspondent, or stringer, while engaged in a futile effort to revive a defunct shopping news in Sunnyvale. Then *the Los Gatos Times*, one of two weeklies in that town, announced it was going to start publishing five days a week starting Sept. 1.

Not surprisingly, the *Mercury Herald* moved to counter this incursion by hiring a full-time correspondent—me—to cover the communities of Los Gatos, Saratoga and Campbell and come into the office daily to write my copy, just like a city-side reporter. There was one significant difference, though: As a Central Coast "correspondent" covering outlying areas, I could and did carry a press camera.

It was an ideal setup for me. I was living at home with my parents and could start my daily coverage as I left the house.

It should go without saying that the west valley of 50 years ago was not a hotbed of breaking news stories. Saratoga was still seven years away from incorporation as a city; Campbell was five. Los Gatos was the only municipality with official meetings to cover. That town also had a chamber of commerce office where I could hang out and make phone calls, checking on such things as passing sirens and touching base with the town's two undertakers.

Placid as it was, Saratoga had its moments. For instance, there was the Saratoga Highway Association, organized to head off the threat of a major north-south freeway, a la Highway 85, through the Village center. It was not a unanimous effort; there were those who argued that Saratoga would literally die on the vine without this infusion of commerce.

It was an ideal setup for me. I was living at home with my parents and could start my daily coverage as I left the house.

There was also the annual Blossom-time Chip-in Day, a Blossom Festival successor. During my first year on the job the event included a Saratoga historical pageant, written and produced by Dr. John E. Cox, the medical practitioner who succeeded the Rev. Dr. Louis Mendelsohn.

Schools were always a source of news, mostly upbeat. This, of course, was at a time when items that never would make it into print today could get some space. One incident on the negative side sticks in mind, however. I think it was around 1951, in the pre-Proposition 13 days when school districts could still set their own tax rates, and Saratoga needed to increase the local levy. A special election was planned.

I had already written stories concerning bond elections and knew of the necessary two-thirds majority vote for passage of such measures. Without checking on the matter, I wrote that an increase in the tax rate also required a two-thirds majority. Wrong. At that time, at least, a simple majority was all that was needed. This, of course, led the opposition—and there was considerable—to believe there wasn't that much of a problem in defeating the tax increase. One opponent, given to sounding off in letters to the editor, sent such a missive to the local paper accusing the *Mercury* of collusion with the pro-tax-hike people. My face was suitably red.

Overall, though, newspaper work has been an eminently satisfying career. That 50-year mark gains added resonance from the fact that, although my official retirement occurred 10 years ago, I still put in one night a week as a *Mercury News* copy editor.

My advice to aspiring newspaper people: Go for the gold.