

Voices In My Head:

Let's Play "Where'd I Leave My Glasses"

By P.J. O'Leary

Politics, the fetid, poisoned bowel movement of human discourse, is a topic I have happily avoided broaching in my time as a small-town columnist. Now, however, I see the future of that very same small town in jeopardy, and I feel compelled to dive in and splash about with yesterday's canned corn.

Most everybody in Vernonia is aware that there will be another school bond issue on November's ballot. I'm not going to tell you how to vote. That's your business. Let me just share with you my vision of what Vernonia will look like if the school bond doesn't pass.

It won't be long after the failure of the bond that parents, students and teachers will come to realize that they are stuck for the foreseeable future with makeshift facilities and an inadequate learning environment. All of these people will leave-- they just will. What we'll be left with is one of those exclusive retirement communities; exclusive in the sense that only aging baby boomer farts like myself will want to continue to live here.

A friend told me that the week I turned fifty, I'd get a letter from the AARP inviting me to join. He said that they know you'll be insulted and throw the first one away, but that two weeks later, they'll send a second one. He was right. I still haven't joined, but I'm pretty sure the AARP monitors your activities and watches for obvious signs of aging. Last week at the Sentry, the clerk gave me my grocery total and I typed that number into the debit machine instead of my PIN. I stood there for awhile before I realized what I had done, so I'm pretty sure I'll be getting another AARP letter soon.

Once the families leave Vernonia, life will be a little different for those of us who are left. There won't be any school sports, but we can amuse ourselves with improvised games like "Where'd I Leave My Glasses," "Connect the Liver Spots," or "Stock the Pillbox."

Maybe we could race those golf carts some of the fellows are driving these days around the lake. At least it would get them off the roads. As a pedestrian, I must admit that I find

the thought of senior men who have voluntarily forfeited their driver's licenses tooling around in silent, 800 pound vehicles a little worrisome. Of course, automobile traffic in the Vernonia Senior Village may be a little unsettling as well. Picture every car in town with a white, grey, blue or bald head barely visible over the steering wheel, turn signals constantly blinking and a raincoat belt flapping helplessly out of the driver's-side door.

Perhaps for another fun activity, we could bus kids in from out of town and set them loose in neighborhoods just so we could chase them off our lawns. If we're lucky, maybe they could help us program our VCRs before they leave.

I imagine we'll still have parades, but instead of Tootsie Rolls, they'll throw chocolate Ex-lax.

We'll probably still have a couple of restaurants, but get there early! They'll close by 6:00 PM, right after the early bird special. So you'll have a nice dinner, get a doggy bag for the half-pat of butter you didn't use, leave a seventy-five cent tip on a twenty-dollar tab ("they make enough") and head home to watch your "program."

The grocery store will have a separate line for anyone with a pencil case full of coupons which will take at least ten minutes to sort through. The produce will be squeezed and prodded until it is rendered virtually unusable.

At this point, some of you might be asking "How do I know if I'm old?" "I don't feel that old," you might be saying. Here are a few simple questions to help you determine whether you're old or not.

1. Do you have one of those colored-glass candy dishes filled with those raspberry- shaped hard candies that nobody likes? Are the candies more than five years old?
2. Do small children avoid you because you smell like mothballs and BenGay?
3. Are the strands in your carpeting longer than the grass on your lawn?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, odds are you'll be a good fit for the Vernonia Senior Village. If you're not comfortable with my vision of future Vernonia, you might want to consider voting for that school bond in the fall. I think you'll be glad you did.

The Great Ethanol Hoax, Part II

By Miles Wickstrom

Last month we talked about the relative efficiencies of producing and consuming gasoline vs. ethanol. This month we'll drill down a little deeper (pun intended) and expose some of the myths that conspire to keep the great ethanol hoax alive.

Myth #1: America can produce all the corn we need to eliminate our dependency on foreign oil.

Former U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz (under Ronald Reagan) and former CIA Director R. James Woolsey (under George H.W. Bush) did a series of joint presentations in 2006 promoting the wonders of ethanol. In their speeches, they claimed that if America reserved just 30 million acres of cropland exclusively to the production of corn for ethanol, we would never again have to import a single drop of oil. Doubtless those words fell on welcoming ears. After all, who wouldn't want to stick it to all those rich sheiks in OPEC. We'll just grow a bazillion ears of corn, convert it to ethanol, and thumb our noses at those greedy so-an-so's. Or not.

There are roughly 450 million acres of arable land in the United States. In theory, we could probably follow the Schultz / Woolsey advice since that would only amount to about 6.5% of the total land available and many thousands of arable acres are left fallow each year. But let's run the numbers just to make sure.

In 2007, we consumed 140 billion gallons of imported gasoline. The ethanol equivalent – taking into account the decrease in BTUs vs. oil – is 186 billion gallons. Do the math: spread 186 billion gallons of ethanol over 30 million acres of farmland and the result is about 6200 gallons per acre. Which leads to the obvious question: can an acre of farmland produce 6200 gallons of ethanol? Uh oh, bad news. The most productive corn-growing acre of land in America today produces 350 gallons of ethanol. Ladies and gentlemen, there is no technology in existence, not is there any technology on the horizon, that will increase corn production per acre by a factor of seventeen.

Myth #2: Ethanol is good for the American farmer.

The growth of ethanol use has certainly kept farmers busy, but has it actually been good for them? The answer in 2007 was a resounding "Yes!" The answer since then has been, "Not so much." One of the truths about farming is that the majority of farmers don't own the land they work. A farmer who works 5000 acres may actually own less than a hundred acres. That's where the farmhouse stands and is often passed down through the generations. The balance of the 5000 acres is leased from banks or investment firms. The cost to lease the land is not a fixed cost; when commodity prices are high, the price of the lease is high. When prices are low, the lease cost is low. Record corn prices were quickly followed by record lease

payments.

At the same time that corn prices more than doubled, diesel fuel prices more than doubled. The cost of fertilizer, which is primarily a petroleum-based product, also rose dramatically as oil leapt past the \$100 a barrel mark. The end result is that, while the gross profit from high priced corn has increased, the net profit has remained much the same because of the increase in variable expenses. Which leads to....

Myth #3: Ethanol is good for America.

Ethanol is lining someone's pockets, or the industry wouldn't exist. So ethanol is certainly good for someone, but it is clearly not a tide that raises all boats. To understand who benefits and who doesn't, one need look no further than the proponents and – tellingly – those who are silent.

In theory, the petroleum industry should be up in arms over the growth in ethanol consumption. After all, the more ethanol we consume, the less gasoline we need to buy. However, the oil industry and their lobbyists have been virtually silent. Why? Simple. Ethanol plants are powered by natural gas. The price of natural gas doubled between 2002 and 2007. Thus, while the amount of oil used as fuel may have dropped, the amount of natural gas has risen. Since the profits for both go into the same pocket, there's no need for the oil industry to be miffed by ethanol's growth.

Big Ag - as opposed to the small farmer – is also doing quite well, thank you. Companies like Archer Daniels Midland, Monsanto, Noble and Cargill supply the seed and the chemicals that make both the fields and the bottom line greener. Their number one priority is return to shareholders. Everything else – environmental stewardship, health concerns, rising consumer costs – are secondary considerations at best.

Finally, you and I have more than one dog in this fight. As more and more acres are devoted to corn production, fewer and fewer acres are available for other foods. We have already experienced increases in our grocery bills as the result of biofuels expansion. When corn for ethanol doubles in price, corn for hogs and cattle also doubles in price. When fewer acres are planted in wheat, the cost of bread and dog food and dozens of other products goes up. Even the U.S.D.A., one of ethanol's biggest boosters, acknowledged in July 2008 that biofuels mandates were driving food prices up.

What can you do? Call your state legislators and the governor's office and give them a piece of your mind. Other promising technologies such as next-generation electric cars and hydrogen powered vehicles will take a back seat as long as ethanol is sitting in the front. The time for knee jerk reactions and pie in the sky solutions is over. I'd like to think that we are too smart to head down a road that knowingly leads to a dead end.

On The Shelf: What's Happening at the Vernonia Library

By Nancy Burch

Throughout the years, many individuals have volunteered time and services to the library with no public acknowledgement. This year, the library board members recommended that recognition be given to volunteers for this past year who have helped in various ways, including organizing books, helping at the circulation desk, cataloging materials, and undertaking programs for children. Certificates of appreciation have been awarded to Jennifer Moloney, Barbara Ward, Orissa Burghard, Myron Lane, Judy Thiringer, Linda Johnston, Kelli Martinez, El Donna Williams, Jonah Ooten, Emily Mitchell, and Nicole Mitchell for their invaluable service to the citizens of the community through their volunteer efforts in the library.

It takes the combined effort of volunteers, Friends of the Library, and the City of Vernonia to continue to provide quality library services and materials, so I'm hoping the individual/individuals who chose to steal from the library this month is feeling guilty and has enough of a conscience to make restitution to the library.

Be sure and check the Summer Reading Schedule for the activities planned for Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays through the month of July and early August and watch for the participants wearing T-shirts with the theme of Be Creative @ Your Library. Registration forms may still be completed at the library.

Summer Library Events

Summer Reading--Tuesdays, Thursdays & Saturdays (Check your schedules)

Tuesday, July 7--Friends of the Library at 6:30 PM
Thursday, July 23 - Mature Movie Night at 7:00 PM
New In Town, with Renee Zellweger and Harry Connick Jr.

Monday, July 27 - Book Discussion 5:30 PM
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