

Some Observations on Yesteryear

by George W. Earley

I was down at the Pink Rat the other afternoon, sharing a frosty pitcher of Black Bart's Best with good friend Kent Allard when a BigBelly several stools down started fulminating about the government.

No problem there . . . I've done the same myself, but he was bad mouthing the postal service, one government outfit that people in my business depend on. You can talk all you want to about FAX and e-mail, but for getting hard copy from here to there with a maximum of reliability, confidentiality and low cost, I'll stick with Uncle Sam.

Now cost was what this good ole boy was belly-aching about. He'd had it straight from his daddy that service had been better and cheaper many long years ago. Unfortunately, either junior hadn't been paying attention or Daddy had forgot to mention a few things, so I stuck my oar in.

Pardon, friend, I said, nice and polite like, but would your daddy be about the same age as me?

Well, he didn't exactly count my wrinkles and gray hairs one by one, but his bloodshot eyes roamed over my tall and once-lanky form a couple times before he nodded in the affirmative.

I remember those days, said I. I grew up in the 30's and your Daddy's right -- letters took a 3¢ stamp and post cards were a penny and the mailman came twice a day, including Saturday.

He was all smiles now, nodding happily to the rest of the crowd who'd sorta bellied up around us, anticipating one of those hot old arguments webfoots enjoy as a diversion from the coastal rains and fogs.

But what your daddy forgot, I went on, was that times then were really really different from now.

There were, says I, only about 140 million of us back in the 30's -- today it's what? Almost double that number. And when you sat down to write a letter in those days, you put in some time doing it. No computers, no quick copy machines so you could send the same letter to several folks. Nope, back then you took a piece of paper and your fountain pen and you carefully wrote . . . real handwriting the way they taught it to you in school. You didn't just scratch away; before you put ink to paper, you thought long and hard about everything you were going to write down.

So not only were there less folks then, but folks just didn't write many letters in those days.

Then there's that cost your daddy talked about. A 3¢ stamp took a letter by train or truck or both and that took awhile. You wanted faster service, you paid extra for domestic Air Mail. Now when was the last time you bought a domestic air mail stamp? Don't remember? That's because it doesn't matter where your letter is going, the postal people send first class by the quickest way. Trains and trucks, sure. But they'll also fly it for the same postage and they've been doing it that way for over 25 years.

Yes, it costs 32¢ now as against 3¢ when there were a lot of us and a whole lot less mail too, but a tenfold price increase in 60 years isn't too bad.

You know what hardcover books cost in the 30's? About \$1.50 to \$2.00. A bit more with fancy bindings. Today? &19.95 and up...waaaaay up!

And back then you could buy a brand-new 2-door sedan for about \$500. Know any new cars selling for \$5000 today? Or even for \$10,000 which would be 20 times that 1936 car? Today more than half of us own two cars . . . I grew up in a neighborhood where a lot of folks took the bus because they couldn't afford a car. Gasoline for those who needed it was about 11-12¢ a gallon . . . multiply that by 10 and you're still some distance under the pump prices today.

So I say a 32¢ stamp doesn't look so spendy, and while it's true we don't get 2 deliveries a day, that's a direct result of all those added millions of people cranking out a lot more letters per person than anyone ever dreamed of 60 years ago. Not to mention, of course, the junk mail, magazines, political fliers, and other 'stuff' that finds its way into my mail box and yours. As a matter of fact, I'm right glad all that stuff doesn't come twice a day!

BigBelly cleared his throat a time or two, all the while noticing folks were bobbin' their heads at what I'd said, and owned as how he'd not thought of it just that way. Looked a bit sorry too, having had what he thought was a good fulmination shot out from under him.

I patted his shoulder, filled his glass with BBB [you were paying attention to what Kent and I were drinking, right?], suggested a couple topics he could rant about and sent him off. Finished my own drink and went out to watch the sun set and sniff the salt breeze. Beautiful as always.

P.S. For those of you who were wondering, there will be an Oregon Dixieland Jamboree next door in Seaside towards the end of February next. For details, prices, a band list, etc., call this number: 1-800-394-3303, or drop a note to The Lighthouse Jazz Society, 415 First Avenue, Seaside 97138. Tell 'em I sent you. •••

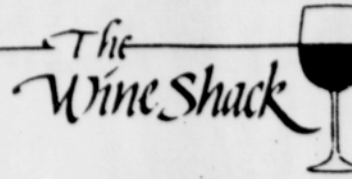


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