



PHOTO BY PETER WERNER

Karl Heinz Martens, for many years the postman for the tree, on the ladder at the Groom Oak.

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disillusioned. It was in winter and the oak was bare. "I had imagined it bigger!" she exclaims. Still, the place around the oak is a singular for them. "The oak has a special place in our hearts," Peter smiles. "Every few years we go to see if it is still there."

Letters instead of chat messages, chance instead of algorithms – what advantages does an old tree have over dating websites? "The Groom Oak is much more romantic than the internet," said the former postman Martens. He is glad to have his computer but the beauty of nature and the special aura around the oak are "just something different than a machine on your desk."

The Pumps are familiar with dating websites from the TV advertisements that they see. When they first met, such sites did not exist. "We used to be happy to have a radiol!" Peter laughed. The couple would recommend young people who are looking for a partner these days to still use the oak, even if modern technology is available. The advantages are clear: "The excitement, the butterflies and romance," Peter said, are somethings that only the Groom Oak can offer. "For those who have a romantic side to them, they should simply try and send a letter to the oak," Marita smiles.

Peter and Marita Pump seem wonderfully similar to one another, which is not a big surprise after spending so many years together. The gestures and looks they exchange make it obvious that these partners for life appreciate the fact that they have been united by a lucky chance. Even when telling their story for the umpteenth time, they look at each other and listen to each other with warmth and love. How remarkable it is that their story began so many years ago when a slip of paper was left in an oak tree!

If you want to send a letter to the Groom Oak, the address is: Bräutigamseiche, Dodauer Forst, 23701 Eutin, Germany. Courtesy of Hempels / INSP.ngo

## Political pranks and modern-day tricksters

Former Salon editor David Daley documents how Republicans are using technology to ensure gerrymandered victories

BY JOE MARTIN  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

**R**atfucked! A raw epithet that goes back to the 1920s. Five decades later, it became a favorite of Richard Nixon's dirty trickster Donald Segretti. During Tricky Dick's re-election campaign in 1972, Segretti was busy plying political pranks on behalf of a president who would resign two years later in the wake of the Watergate scandal. In service to Nixon, Segretti would "ratfuck" opponents with sleazy shenanigans. One such ploy involved Washington state's longtime Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson.

For a period during that campaign season, Sen. Edmund Muskie of Maine was a strong candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. Segretti managed to steal "Citizens for Muskie" stationary. On it was written a dissembling letter, which was then distributed, supposedly with Muskie's endorsement. The false missive accused Sen. Jackson of siring a baby with a teenage girl. That and other difficulties forced Muskie to drop out of the race. But Segretti had demonstrated his skill at ratfucking.

The term has gotten a new lease in a book by former Salon Editor-in-Chief David Daley entitled "Ratf\*\*ked: Why Your Vote Doesn't Count." Barack Obama's victory in 2008 sent a shiver throughout the ranks of the Republican faithful. A sea change seemed about to engulf the nation's political milieu that would relegate the GOP to an anachronism. Then a savvy Republican operative Chris Jankowski stepped to the fore and spied an opportunity.

Jankowski proved the mastermind of a contemporary version of ratfucking, commingling the old practice of gerrymandering with new technology. In many parts of the country the result has been preposterous reconfigurations of voting districts that have given advantage to Republican candidates at all levels of government, even when the majority of voters favored Democrats – a brilliant, cynical yet not illegal maneuver. According to Daley, this political environment essentially nullifies votes submitted by millions of Americans. An article in the American Prospect calls it "a major threat to representative democracy."

Gerrymandering takes its name from the early 19th-century governor of Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry. In 1812 he legalized a redistricting scheme that on the map looked like the outline of a salamander. A cartoonist for the Boston Gazette portrayed the district as a monster dubbed the "gerrymander."

In 2014 La Salle University political science professor Mary Ellen Balchunis ran unsuccessfully as a Democrat for Congress in Pennsylvania's 7th District. She memorably describes the Rorschach-like Republican-drawn district: "I see Donald Duck kicking Goofy." She stated further, "When I teach gerrymandering to my students, I think of the salamander. This is

much worse than the salamander."

Early in 2010, in a 5 to 4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court decided Citizens United. It unleashed opulent players to lavish obscene amounts of political donations however they wished. Super pacs swelled with unfettered contributions, "much of it 'dark money' impossible to trace back to the donor." The midterm elections that year were a disaster for Democrats.

Every 10 years after the national census many state legislatures and governors have the prerogative to redo voting districts. Prior to the 2010 midterms REDMAP – Redistricting Majority Project – was the name for the Republican State Legislative Committee's strategy to take as many legislatures as possible. Executive director Jankowski used sophisticated technology called Maptitude, which allowed mountains of data to be finely incorporated in analyzing ethnicities, class composition and political leanings of any area. In urban settings it could provide an accurate snapshot block by block.

This was not old-fashioned guesswork, fiddling with paper maps and pens. With precise algorithmic ease a district could be "packed and cracked," meaning that one party could be segregated into neatly demarcated and more populous enclaves – mostly Democratic – while the other party could garner votes from wider-flung, less populous districts and predictably obtain more seats – mostly Republican.

This slick maneuver was not a secret. Republican operative Karl Rove wrote a piece in the March 4, 2010, Wall Street Journal announcing REDMAP, understanding whichever party controls the way districts are drawn could more easily control who gets elected. Daley states: "The assertion is so bold, yet so sensical, that



ILLUSTRATION BY JON WILLIAMS

one does not know whether to stand back and admire the audaciousness, indict the Democrats for gross negligence and lack of imagination, or simply howl over the undemocraticness of it all."

About a dozen states have independent redistricting commissions, which presumably bring an element of nonpartisanship into this process. Still many aspects of electoral abuse remain in place. Organizations like FairVote – where "Ratfucked" author David Daley now works as communications director – are at work to remake the way politicians are elected and that will result in greater representation for all citizens at all levels of government. They envision forms of proportional representation through "ranked-choice voting" and "instant runoff voting" that can level the political field and yield constructive discussion on exigent matters such as climate change, national debt, housing and homelessness, civic education and citizen participation. Recently FairVote held an invigorating summit in Washington, D.C., which brought together activists from around the nation.

In another momentous development, the U.S. Supreme Court is currently deliberating the question of extreme gerrymandering and the disenfranchisement of voters. Justices are considering a formula that could ensure a more egalitarian way of drawing district lines. Justice Anthony Kennedy may be the decisive vote in this most important case. Says Daley: "It's not hyperbole to suggest that Justice Kennedy's vote is the last bulwark against authoritarian minority rule." The court's decision is expected sometime next spring.

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