

Years gone by like summer fields

Forty-five years ago this month I was walking off a softball field after an irritating tournament loss. A man approached me and introduced himself as Warren Leary. He commended me on my play and then told me about his newspaper.

How Warren Leary knew me and that I was a semester away from wrapping up journalism studies at UW-Eau Claire, or how he ended up in Prairie Farm that Saturday in July watching softball and a skinny long-haired center fielder, I didn't know. Never asked.

Mr. Leary wanted to know if I was interested in a 2-week internship in August at The Chronotype newspaper in Rice Lake. I was. It would be a little addition to my resume, and it beat baling hay before I went back to Eau Claire in late August.

Five months later, Mr. Leary asked me to join the news staff. I graduated from college the Saturday before Christmas but skipped graduation ceremonies that day to move my few belongings and pieces of furniture to a crammed upstairs apartment on West Evans Street in Rice Lake. I reported for work at 28 South Main Street on Dec. 22, 1975.

The holiday days quickly rolled me into 1976, but not without celebrating my first stories and photos in The Chronotype with a bottle of sweet wine from Osterbauer Drugs and my venison steak. I was a "newspaper man," though around the office of veteran newspaper folks, I was "The Kid," a tag you are struck with perhaps only once in your life, one you may despise at the time but are bound to look back on with nostalgia and a smile.

The Kid chased fires and accidents, but also took on inglorious assignments nobody else wanted. I wrote all the obituaries, daily taking notes on a rotary telephone and translating them into standard obits. I grew restless, and 18 months after taking on my first newspaper job, I left, to the dismay of Mr. Leary, who was the best newspaper man I've ever known—my harshest critic and biggest fan.

I had no plan. I farmed with my parents and traveled to the West Coast on a short trip with a friend. Somewhere on the Oregon dunes next to the Pacific Ocean, I decided I wanted to get back to newspapering. I kept my fingers in The Chronotype with freelance photos and stories, and in the summer of 1978, Mr. Leary



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said there were staff changes coming. Would I come back as sports editor? Yes, and on Aug. 9, 1978, it was official.

"Looking back at the years gone by like so many summer fields."

I was listening to Jackson Browne singing those words in the summer of 1978, listening more to the melody than the verses. A 24-year-old with a dream job doesn't think about the years going by. But they do.

How many games? By conservative estimate, 12,000. How many photos taken? Perhaps half a million. Or more. Issues? That's easier. A little on either side of 2,250.

My last issue will be July 15. It will all go away, I guess. The trapped, nervous feeling of deadline Tuesday. The exhilaration of seeing one's efforts, and the fear of mistakes, in Wednesday's new edition. The brief period of relaxing before being thrust into the next week of stories and assignments, your schedule and family life dictated by the next game, the next interview, the next phone call, the next column, the next deadline. Over and over.

I only hope I handled it well, not making too many enemies or mistakes along the way of doing what is most important, that of serving the reader by passionately and accurately telling the story in words and photos. Telling their stories, or the stories of their neighbors and community, or simply a good story just for the sake of reading.

Newspaper work never ends. I have lists of stories and photos I didn't get to. So I have regrets sprinkled among the work I did do, the stories I enjoyed doing, the wonderful people I met in doing those stories, and maybe, through my efforts, I made them feel good. I'm thankful for the opportunity.

I hope to be around, providing some pieces the freelance route. And I have started my blog: davegreschneroutdoorjournal.org. Yeh, another start. I'm not The Kid anymore, but I hope I've gained inspiration and something yet to share from all those years gone by like so many summer fields.