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# Country Cousin

## Farewell...

Today's column is the hardest I have ever had to write, or ever will have to write. After being published every week for more than 25 years, the "Country Cousin" is being put to rest. This will be the final "Country Cousin" printed in the *Peshtigo Times*.

I retired from full-time duties in July after 50 years as a *Peshtigo Times* reporter, so it is time to bid you all a fond farewell and move on.

### "COUNTRY COUSIN" HISTORY

Before "Country Cousin" was born in about 1969, the *Peshtigo Times* published a weekly column called "Aunt Kitty," which included observations about the world in general, local events and landscape and some seasonal recipes. The identity of the author was a carefully guarded secret, mainly because "she" was first a couple, and then the husband after his wife died. Eventually, he also passed away and my request to write a substitute for his popular column was approved.

I named the new column "Country Cousin," partly because it was the offspring of Aunt Kitty and partly because nearly everyone in Marinette County seems to be a cousin.

From that time to this, for more than a quarter of a century, whenever I found a new recipe, spotted new information in a magazine or online, witnessed a random act of kindness or overheard a good joke, I would try it out, clip it or jot it down to be included in a future column.

My home, office and brain are filled to overflowing with all these old clippings and snippets of information. Collecting and saving them will be a hard habit to break.

### WORKING WITH THE PESHTIGO TIMES

My employment with the *Peshtigo Times* began in July of 1974, when I was hired by L. J. Pesch, who had acquired the defunct *Peshtigo* newspaper in 1929, at the depth of the Great Depression. LJ, as we called him, was a rural *Peshtigo* native who had a passion for fighting for honest and open government, protecting freedom of the press and keeping lawmakers on the right track. LJ was thrilled that at least one reader referred to him as "the guardian angel of Marinette County."

### WONDERFUL MENTORS

During my years at the *Peshtigo Times* I had the privilege of being mentored by LJ and his daughter and son-in-law, Charles and Mary Ann Gardon, who were news editors before turning that job over to their son, Chuck Gardon, who was my much loved boss from the time they retired until last summer, when the *Peshtigo Times* was purchased by its new owners, MMC, Inc.

### PROUD ACHIEVEMENT

One of my proudest achievements during my 50-year career as a news reporter was helping LJ with a successful campaign to preserve our county's fledgling Emergency Medical Response units, better known as Rescue Squads. Our publicity convinced the state Department of Health to hold EMT classes here so volunteers could meet their new set of requirements, and the person who had imposed the rule that could have destroyed our volunteer units was removed from her position.

### MY STORY

Since the new *Peshtigo Times* Editors have asked me to write my own exit interview as part of today's column, I will do the best I can. If it sometimes sounds like I'm boasting, maybe I am. I am a bit proud of the opportunities my life has given me to meet some very special people and do some very special things.

I was once invited for a personal tour of the Air Traffic Control Tower at the airport in Green Bay, covered the Federal court case in Green Bay that resulted in *Peshtigo* Women's Club leasing Triangle Park at Christmas each year so a manager scene could legally be displayed there and traveled with a conservation club to count calls on a "Wolf Howling" adventure in the forested wilderness near Goodman and much more.

Though it was prior to my time as a reporter, I was privileged to meet President John F. Kennedy when he spoke at Marinette Catholic Central High School during his first presidential campaign, and later met President George W. Bush when he campaigned in Green Bay.

I have met Wisconsin Governors Anthony Earl, Lee Dreyfus, Jim Doyle, Tommy Thompson, Scott Walker and Tony Evers, and had my picture taken with several of them. Gov. Walker once asked me to stand next to him for a photo, explaining I am one of the few people who make him feel tall. I can stretch to 5'2", if I'm wearing heels.

### THE EARLY YEARS

I was born Aug. 14, 1941 to Harold (Boots) and Clara Boivin, who were living and working on the Seton farm just outside of Coleman. We moved to Marinette when I was two. The home I grew up in is at the corner of Eighth and Miller, just across from what was Zoellner's Grocery Store and the Subway Pub and just a short jaunt down the back alley from Merryman School, which I attended from Kindergarten through sixth grade.

I went to Marinette Junior High for seventh and eighth grades before transferring to Our Lady of Lourdes High School. The name of that school was changed to Marinette Catholic Central in 1959, the year I graduated.

Writing has always been my first love, and during high school Lori Harper of *Peshtigo* and I were co-editors of our school paper, *The Centralite*.

My life plan was to attend Marquette University and then become a foreign correspondent. However, that changed when I met Wayne Prudhomme, who had just come home to Marinette after two years with the US Army in Germany.

We were married in January of 1960, and our son, Tom, was born later that year. Our family eventually grew to include five grandsons - Jason, Dan, Neil,

Christopher and Jacob, and one granddaughter, Nicole (Nikk). There are now also eight great grandchildren. Life has had good times and bad ones. Wayne died in 2004 after being ill for many years, and Tom passed away last October from ALS.

### NEWSPAPER HISTORY

My first job in the newspaper business was as a teletype setter with what was then the *Marinette Eagle Star* when I was first out of high school. After Wayne and I were married we moved to Appleton, where he was employed as a steeplejack and painter with his brother-in-law, Kenneth Erdman.

I worked as a waitress at Marc's Big Boy in Appleton and was trained by professional waitress Zella Belle, who had come from California to handle that task. That training helped when we bought our own restaurant a few years later. Pay was 76 cents per hour, plus tips, which occasionally came to \$8 a day.

### BACK TO THE NEWSPAPER

A dispute with a Big Boy chef led me to apply for a teletype setter job at the *Appleton Post Crescent*. I was hired. Best change ever! They paid \$3.70 per hour to start, plus I got to use one of the first computers in the Wisconsin newspaper business and was trained as a proof reader.

We bought an old fixer-upper house for \$8,000, remodeled and settled in. By coincidence, Father John Bergstadt, one of my good friends and classmates at Marinette Catholic Central, was assistant pastor of our parish and Tom's catechism teacher.

In 1969 we moved to Algona after buying a restaurant, bar and howling alley in partnership with Wayne's brother Ron and his wife Pat. We named our new business "The Shells," and often kept the restaurant open 24 hours a day to get both the late night bar crowd and the early morning fishing crowd.

My Mom said I learned more during those four years of bartending, cooking, waitressing and running a business than I would have learned in a dozen years of college, and I believe she was right. Mainly, I learned to deal with people.

After four years I was diagnosed with cancer. Surgical removal was successful, but during my recovery I decided if I lived I didn't want to spend the rest of my life working that hard.

We had previously bought a half interest in the 57-acre farm my grandfather, Bernard Dittman, had carved from the cut-over wilderness along the *Peshtigo* River just south of Crivitz sometime prior to 1912. We decided to sell *The Shells* and make that property our full time home. We later bought out my parents' interest, and I am blessed to still be living there.

After moving to Crivitz in early 1973 we raised a large garden, did a lot of foraging and I worked part time waitressing and cooking at the *Rendezvous*, which was owned by Wayne's childhood friend Mike Blohm and his wife Louise.

### START AT THE PESHTIGO TIMES

In early summer of 1974 I went to the *Peshtigo Times* office to place a want ad. LJ waited on me. On a whim I asked if he had any teletype setter job openings. I had worked with him occasionally during my days as *Centralite* editor, since the *Peshtigo Times* did our printing. I was amazed to find that he remembered me.

He said they had no teletype setter openings, but asked if I would be interested in writing.

That was the answer to a dream! The rest is history.

LJ asked to see some of my old stories, and then asked me to write a new one. Wayne and I had a hobby of caring for orphan wild animals and letting them run free. I turned in a story about "Sam, The Lovable Porcupine" who kept coming back to visit and turned the story in.

I heard no more until the first week of July, when I found our *Peshtigo Times* in the mail box, with my story above the mast on page one! When I got back to the house the phone was ringing. It was LJ, calling to offer me the job I have worked at ever since.

### NEAR NORTH DISPOSAL

Meanwhile, Mike had talked Wayne into starting a garbage company with Dave Rogalski as another partner, and that started us along another whole new path to what became Near North Disposal and Salvage.

Eventually Mike dropped out of that business and Dave went back to being an electrician, but Wayne and I kept the garbage business going with the help of our young son, Tom and much later his wife, Cindy and some of their sons. Eventually we had municipal contracts covering most of north and central Marinette County. We sold the business in 1997.

### RECOGNITION

In addition to my work with the *Peshtigo Times* and the garbage route, I became active during the early 1980's in what was then the brand new Crivitz Business Association (CBA). I helped promote the Crivitz area and worked with Sandra Matty, wife of State Rep. Dick Matty, to compile a community profile that got Crivitz included in some statewide economic development publications. I was rewarded for my efforts by being named the CBA "Citizen of the Year" in 1987.

Meanwhile, my responsibilities for the *Peshtigo Times* were expanding. I began covering County Board meetings. I would sit at those meetings, taking notes and biting my tongue. I was not allowed to talk, and the supervisors were not asking questions that needed to be answered.

Apparently I complained too much at home. Wayne finally said if I thought I could do a better job, I should run for office. I checked into the legalities and found that I could hold the elected county position and still write for the newspaper, as long as I didn't cover the meetings I was involved in.

The first time I ran I lost by three votes, but two years later, in 1990, I was elected to the County Board.

I served as a Supervisor for 16 years before being defeated in 2006. And yes, during my time as a Supervisor I talked a lot and asked a lot of questions.

Instead of running again I returned to attending county meetings as a reporter. Still, I had to bite my tongue, but not as hard. Writing the "On The Soap Box" segment of "Country Cousin" each week helped with that.

Both as a County Supervisor and as a news reporter, I have had the privilege of working with some legendary people, have made many friends and have been able to help make some wonderful dreams for *TIMESLand* become realities.

For this I will always be grateful!

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