

A Thanksgiving Trilogy With Laments and Questions

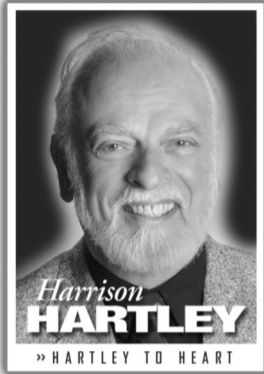
(One.) When Lewis and Clark traversed Missouri in 1804, their first long stop was a camp at the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. This was noteworthy for several reasons, not least of which because two expedition members were tried there by a jury of their peers for stealing whisky while on watch. (One, who admitted it, was given something like fifty lashes, and the other, who did not, was awarded twice that number. They both survived, and continued with the rest of the party the day after their punishment was administered.)

This was in June, and for their part nothing to be thankful for. But what adds poignancy to Lewis's observations of the area was his wonder at the immense flock of Carolina parakeets inhabiting the surrounding woods.

Parakeets – thousands of them – in Missouri and Kansas. Where are they? Wildlife was generally abundant, but the birds were remarked for their numbers. Of course, Lewis also observed a large herd of elk near the present town of Rockport not far from the Missouri-Iowa border, and deer, bears, beaver, and all such creatures were both common

and plentiful. Where are they?

In America, we have much to be thankful for in the way of wildlife and natural resources of all kinds (clean water, for example – a blessing we ought not take lightly among so many others and one rare in many parts of the world and under siege by mismanagement and sloppy use here.) Much to be thankful for, still. But:



The last Carolina parakeet died in 1918, four years after Martha, the last passenger pigeon; both at the Cincinnati zoo. Why? They are symptomatic of the folly with which we have expended our bounty, and the death of

these and many other entire species belies our often-vaunted national thankfulness. If we were really thankful, would be also not protect and preserve what we have, and use it wisely?

(Two.) Some days ago, I stopped at a garage sale as a matter of idle curiosity to kill some time looking for "treasures" but not really expecting to find any. I found some.

Among the detritus of several lives "on the auction block" were some small woodcarvings of animals and a half dozen beautifully fashioned chess pieces. At fifty cents each, I was intrigued. "Can

you tell me about these?" I asked. The woman running the affair (about my age; not young but not quite "over the hill either) scratched her gray, frizzy hair absently and answered, "Oh, my Dad carved those when I was a little kid. He used to carve stuff like that sometimes."

"But they're really good," I said. "Do you have a lot of them?" "Nope," she answered. "Them's about all I got. Had 'em in a box in the basement with some other junk. I guess they're okay. You can have 'em for a little cheaper if you'll take all of 'em." Yes, of course I took all of them; a few dollars worth: cheap for a father, I think. Was he worth it, I wondered? Was that level of skill worth a few dollars, and if not, why not? "Did you like your Dad," I asked? "What kind of a guy was he?" "Oh yeah – he was great with kids. We all got a kick out of him. Been dead for ... what? Maybe ten, twelve years. I still miss him sometimes, though." Yes, and you are so thankful for who he was and what he could do that you sell what's left of him with the other "junk."

Doesn't being "thankful" carry some obligation? Doesn't it mean that whatever it is you're "thankful" for you don't take lightly; that you try to preserve and protect it? (Right – like Passenger pigeons and

Carolina parakeets, or even water. Heaven help us!)

(Three.) Driving through Kansas City on my way to teach one of the last classes before Thanksgiving break, I happened to have the radio tuned to a discussion on what to do about the homeless panhandlers "infesting" downtown when a figure caught my eye at the south end of Broadway bridge: tall; long, kinky hair; old army fatigues; about fifty; one front tooth missing... the very same panhandler who had just been interviewed! He held up his sign: "Homeless Vet." It was him, and what was it he had said? "I hate to be out here, but I got no choice. I'm down on my luck and you got to do what you got to do. I fought for my country, too, in Viet Nam, but I got nothin' to show for it, man, nothin'!"

I wondered how many of his troubles were of his own making – but then, I've often wondered how many of mine were of my own making as well. We all have help with that, too, from time to time. Stopped by the light, I held a couple of dollars out the window. He took them, nodded, said "Thanks, man," and shuffled off, hunched against the wind, toward the next car back.

"There but for the Grace of God," I thought, "and a little luck here and there. Thanks, indeed!"

City Still Looking for Help with CSO Mandate

The City of St. Joseph continues to look for help to pay for its \$446 million federal mandate to reduce the number of untreated sewer overflow spills into the Missouri River.

Much of the problem is because most of St. Joseph west of the Belt Highway have combined sanitary and storm sewers. During dry weather there's few problems.

But even a small rain can push more water to our sewage treatment facility than it can handle.

The city, based on recommendations from its consultant, Black and Veach, is moving forward on two fronts.

One is reducing and slowing down the creeks and rainwater runoff flowing into our sewers.

The second is adding a higher-rate of treatment to our current facility. This would allow the city to treat more wastewater so there are fewer spills.

Also being discussed, largely at the urging of **Council member Bill Falkner**, a local plumber, is the addition of a second treatment facility on the city's east side, which lies in the 102 River watershed instead of the Missouri River's.

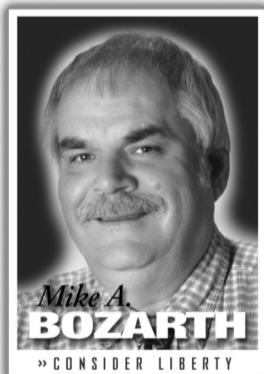
\$446 million is a large and sour-tasting pill for us to swallow.

The city has persistently looked for grants and any other assistance we

can get to help pay for this.

Mayor Ken Shearin has touted this as "an un-funded federal mandate" and a violation of the Tenth Amendment.

Constitution advocates, such as **State Rep. Jim Guest** (R-King City) understand and agree with Mayor Shearin's complaints against unfunded federal mandates. I agree as well.



But reality says the federal government has the power and they are going to make the rules. Right or wrong, they can make St. Joseph shut down its water treatment facility if we don't comply.

Because of the economic realities of St. Joseph--that our income is lower than the state average, and that we have a higher percentage of people living under the poverty level, the feds are having a little "mercy" on us.

St. Joseph is currently only looking at completing Phase 1 of our CSO plan in the next 20 years--at a cost of \$136 million. As bad as it is--it will require about a 300% increase in our sewer bills--it is still better than having to cough up \$446 million in the same 20 years.

The city, since 1993, has self-financed and used Revenue Bonds (paid through user fees) to pay for its sewage treatment costs.

Last week there was a lot of dissap-

pointment when St. Joseph didn't receive any of the president's federal stimulus funds to help us pay for some of that cost.

Many cities across Missouri received funding for projects not nearly as serious as what St. Joseph faces.

Apparently it was decided that American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (federal stimulus) funds would be distributed through the annual State Revolving Fund (SRF). To qualify for SRF funding a city must issue general obligation bonds--by a public vote on a tax increase to pay for them.

Since St. Joseph hasn't used SRF funding for the last 16 years, we never got on the list to receive federal stimulus funding.

On November 20th, Mayor Shearin and **Public Works Director Bruce Woody** went to Jefferson City to meet with state government leaders on the city's sewers. They met with **Gov. Jay Nixon's** Deputy Chief of Staff and the Deputy Director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (the state agency tasked with enforcing EPA rules).

Gov. Nixon's office and the DNR are better informed on our dire need for assistance, but no concrete measures were taken.

At Monday's City Council Landfill and Water Protection Committee meeting, (which I chair), Mayor Shearin proposed that myself or another Councilmember along with a

representative of city staff go to Jefferson City on a regular basis to continue to lobby on the city's behalf. Council informally agreed to do just that on a quarterly basis.

Along with city staff and the mayor, I asked **Ken Reeder** to outline some possibilities for the city. Ken is the area's representative to the Missouri River Recovery Commission and a member of the local Port Authority. He mentioned a possibility of funding through another federal agency that has been unknown until now.

Mayor Shearin also said we need to look at turning to a vote of the people for a general obligation bond to pay for part of the sewer improvements--which would help put us in line for other funding possibilities, along with a lower interest rate.

City staff asked "what if city voters said no?" Then what do we do?

Indeed it is hard to drum up much excitement for a tax increase to pay for something most people never see. It is hard enough to drum up support for more visible and "pleasing" projects--such as a bond for street improvements, or public safety.

I have never cared much for taxes, and have voted against most. But I do think we should get more public feedback on the mayor's proposal. By limited our revenue sources, we now find our we are limiting our grant possibilities.