

# Opinion

A community forum for viewpoints from around the world to your backyard

## The Clinch County News

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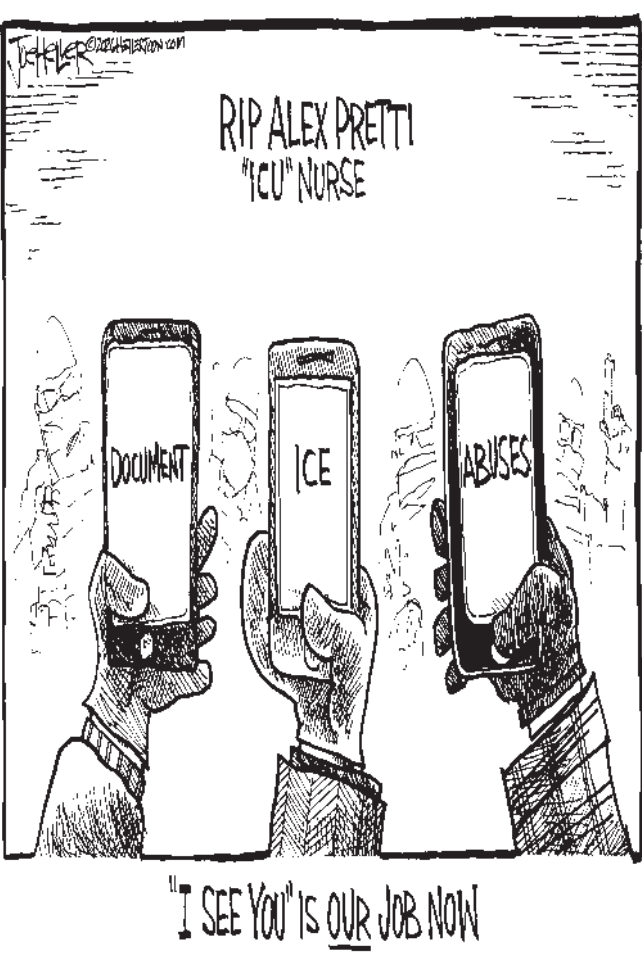
## TALL TALES

By Lem Griffis

Uncle Paul was brought up in a rough way. For that reason he was a very rough guy. He was born in a cane-brake, nursed by a bear, had three rows of jaw teeth and a double coat of hair. Drank three drops of elephant's milk to make him strong. He came to this country riding a man-eating tiger, whipping him with a live rattlesnake; chewed haywire for tobacco; and could spit a ten-penny nail through a two-inch board.

Truthfully yours,  
Lem Griffis

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## If I had to do it all over again...

The preacher's query caught my divided attention: "What would you do if you knew then what you know now?"

It's been asked before, most notably in the 1986 slapstick tear-jerker, "Peggy Sue Got Married," and a major motion picture about going back in time every other year since then.

While listening to the sermon, I pondered the proposition: Knowing what I know now (which isn't much, according to the results of my online IQ test), what would I do differently? What have I learned in middle age? What do I regret? How would I change my life or behavior? Why am I sitting alone in an empty church? Did the service end?

That said, knowing what I know now, if I had to do it all over again, I would:

- Never comment on a woman's pregnancy. NEVER. I don't care how obvious it is. Pregnancy is not something you should ASSUME.
- Always make sure that my filter is activated in my mind before I speak.

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Too often, something has gone straight from my senses to my mouth, bypassing my brain.

- Never own a credit card.

You can reserve a hotel room with a debit card.

- Travel more before I started a career.
- Not eat that McRib.
- Take piano lessons as a child.

My mother taught lessons at our home, but I was "too cool" to be interested. I could have learned the piano FOR FREE (another assumption).

- Not have wasted that half-hour watching "Sex in the City."

I'll never get that time back.

- Be more kind to my teachers.
- Not join the Columbia Record Club when I was nine years old.

Sure, it sounded great – seven albums

for a penny. But that decision, through a chain of events, led to my ownership of "Barry Manilow Live!"

- Not eat a dozen doughnuts every morning when I was 18 years old.

At my first newspaper job, my boss (who also happened to be my uncle) would buy a dozen doughnuts every morning and dare me to eat them.

I would, much to his glee. That was the beginning point of the fatbuttery that plagues me today. The second time around, I would respectfully decline.

- Act on that idea I had about creating what's now known as the Internet (I called it "Computerland.")
- Change little about my career path.

As much as the newspaper industry is struggling now, being a "small-town" newspaper

guy has provided a quality of life I wouldn't trade for anything.

• Never trust anything I hear "on the street." Or see on Facebook. Except from this newspaper.

• Always ask myself before saying something critical or opinionated: What is my intent?

If my intent is honestly anything selfish or not for someone else's benefit, I shouldn't say it. Basically, keep my big mouth shut.

• Conversely, I would also make sure to speak up when confronted with something I know to be stupid, wrong, corrupt, or shady.

On a number of occasions, I have kept my big mouth shut out of fear or cowardice, when I should have spoken up for something or someone.

The last couple of years has tested my resolve on this keenly.

- I would marry the same woman.

Maybe I should have saved that for Valentine's Day.

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## A River of Memories

Every year since the late 1940s a group of men has departed from Hawkinsville on a three-night river trip to the Atlantic Ocean. Fourteen to twenty friends usually ride two per boat and share tents as they camp along the water.

They launch on the Ocmulgee River, which merges downstream with the Oconee to form the Altamaha. Four days at a leisurely pace gets them to St. Simons Island.

The first Wednesday in January is their standing departure date. Ernest Mashburn, a longtime friend of our family, can attest that inclement weather doesn't allow for delay. On his first outing in 1990 the temperature was 17 degrees.

Sometimes the water level is ideal. At other times it can be challenging, either too low or too high. Ernest only skipped one trip during three decades. He and several others decided not to go when the Ocmulgee reached 21 feet, an unforgiving stage. Those who went navigated the currents without major incident, but had difficulty finding dry ground for campsites.

Hawkinsville residents Roger Lawson and Thomas Bemby decided in the late 1940s that a boat ride to the coast would be a fun and rewarding experience. What began as a lark

evolved into a cherished tradition that's still going strong.

A newspaper article from around 2004 includes a group photo of 13 men. Hugh Lawson and Johnny Bemby, son and nephew of the event's founders, are pictured. River-trip enthusiasts have continued to surface in later generations of several families.

The late Hugh Lawson, a federal judge, assumed the organizer's role at some point. Ernest described him as having a great sense of humor and being a superb storyteller. His response to the mishap of a close friend offers proof.

Ramsey "Bub" Way was a regular participant on countless excursions. One year when his boat had mechanical trouble, he held the bendix gear in place so it could be cranked. As the starter was engaged it sheared off the tip of a finger. During the following year's trip, Judge Lawson nailed a metal sign to a tree commemorating the minor tragedy: "On this spot, January 3, 1991, Bub Way became Nub Way."

In the 2004 newspaper story, one unnamed fellow offered an assessment of their annual adventures. "Don't quote me," he said, "but there are four things we enjoy. One is the ride, two is the

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cooking, three is the bragging, and four is the libations."

We'll focus on the rides today. Ernest hasn't been since 2019, but trips down that river blessed him with a boatload of memories, such as the partially-submerged steamboat. It was discovered on the Lawson-Bemby maiden voyage, resting in the middle of the Alapaha a little below Baxley. It hadn't been there long as everything was still intact. The adventuresome duo went aboard and took a couple of pots and pans from the galley as souvenirs.

Metal sections of the boat outlasted the wood, but the flood of 1994 moved the entire vessel. The steamboat's history remains a mystery.

Another memory Ernest shared is of abandoned liquor stills. Remnants of a once-vibrant operation were located near Penn Holloway Creek. A shallow ditch which veered off the creek offered limited access to the secluded spot. It was a favored camping site with empty barrels repurposed for conversation.

Ernest wistfully described the expansive confluence of the waters

where the Altamaha forms. He said they'd tie their boats together and drift in the swirls for a while, just relaxing among good company. If I ever make a bucket list, I'll put that near the top.

I can't begin to capture an 88-year-old man's recollections of multiple trips down the river. But a few old-timers will gladly share their memories if you ask.

Thomas Bemby went on those jaunts until his late eighties. He'd sing little ditties like "Shoe Fly" as others grinned and sang along. Ernest recalled the January launch when Mr. Bemby had decided to stay home. As the boats eased away from the landing, he stood on the banks of the Ocmulgee to say goodbye to his friends. And a rugged old man cried like a baby.

River trips are filled with laughter and tales of yesterdays, but teardrops on the water's edge show streams of love displayed. What began as a lark became a lasting tradition. And a river of memories keeps flowing toward the sea.

Neil Joiner is a syndicated newspaper columnist from Dooly County.