

On the subject of...

From Trash to Treasury

by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

At the May 2, 2007, meeting of Aberdeen's board of aldermen, Mayor Cecil Belle announced his annual appointments. Each year, the Mayor decides which alderman will have stewardship over what department. For example, this year Jim Buffington, not Cloyd Garth, will be the board's liaison to the police department. (You can practically hear the sigh of relief from police headquarters.) In the past, Buffington has been in charge of the Finance Committee. It is this committee which looks after the City's spending – a critically important function – arguably the most important duty of all. You can only imagine my shock when I learned that this year, the Mayor chose Garth to chair the finance committee.

EGAD! Phrases about foxes and henhouses come immediately to mind.

Normally, the Finance Committee chairman's reporting

responsibilities are fairly simple. He reviews the bills payable, obtains answers to any questions he might have and then puts his stamp of approval on the docket of claims. At the regular board meeting, he makes the motion to pay the bills, the roll is called and the deed is done. Now we have an entirely different set of circumstances, and as far as I'm concerned, Garth's record on financial matters makes him an altogether unacceptable choice.

It has been nearly a year since yours truly requested of Garth and his wife an accounting of the City funds, which were used in last year's Save Our Children Day debacle. It was the Garths who requested money from the city to help with the SOC event. The application they submitted indicated that the grant would be used for the printing of brochures and the mailing of same.

Interestingly, no brochures were actually printed. Instead, Xeroxed copies of flyers were made (probably on one of the City's copy machines) and hand delivered to businesses around town. After repeated requests, no report of expenditures was ever made. A written request to the City's accounting department finally turned up a Walmart (Amory) receipt for hotdog buns, a few gas receipts and payment for the rental of inflatable toys. (Since the Save Our Children Day event was to heighten child abuse awareness, it is difficult for me to imagine the necessity of blow-up toys. But, what do I know about such things?)

The receipts submitted for payment totaled just about half of the \$500 initially granted to the event, but receipts could not be obtained for the balance of the money. Continued on Page 2

Silly habit very time-consuming

By Contributing Editor Don Rowe

I have a confession to make: I have an obsessive habit of taking a red pen and circling all of the mistakes each week in the current issues of the *Aberdeen Examiner* and *The Amory Advertiser*. For several hours every Wednesday evening, I'm in my own little world as I correct each and every page of both newspapers.

As a rule, I don't usually apply the red pen to stories with bylines by Barbara Harrington, Alice Ortiz or Chris Wilson. For the most part, all three of them know how to spell, how to con-

struct a sentence and most importantly, how to check their work. All of them, on occasion, will overlook a typo, a misspelled word or a grammatical mistake, as we all have and as we will continue to do.

But as far as my red pen is concerned, any story written by Robbie Byrd, anything without a byline, cutlines (captions under pictures or illustrations) and all sports stories are fair game – all of which are like the gift which just keeps on giving. Incredibly, these examples do not include Byrd's equally disas-

trous efforts as sports editor of both papers from October of 2005 to January of 2006, after which he was *promoted* to news/sports editor, then to managing editor/operations leader and finally (recently) to general manager. What merited those promotions? I'll let you decide, but if Charlotte (his boss) Wolfe's habit of rewarding sheer incompetence with rapid promotions keeps up, Byrd may be sitting in her chair before too long. So, without Continued on page 4

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Ultimately the check was cut for the full \$500 and it was thereafter called a *donation*. For all these months, Garth has successfully kept his SOC expenditures secret. Now, God help us, he has the keys to the town treasury!

For all his clever sleight of hand where the SOC funds are concerned, Garth seems to have no trouble “leaking” other information. Recently, documents surfaced creating something of a stir here at the Advocate office. The substantial pile of paperwork, found in a very public rubbish bin, included city dockets of claims going back to November 2006. Because city documents are, for the most part, open to public review, most of the stack would have been available to anybody who took the time to make a written request to review it.

Nevertheless, there were also confidential personnel records, medical information, personnel recommendations and overtime pay reports in the formidable stack which ought not to have been made public. Many of these documents have Cloyd E. Garth Sr.’s name handwritten upon them. It might be reasonable to assume that the documents were originally entrusted to Garth. The fact that there was also a school report relating to one Rachel Garth among the documents might serve to confirm the original owner of the papers. Let me say here for the record, alderman Garth assures me that neither he nor any member of his family carelessly and/or recklessly threw such documents away. I am left to conclude, then, that the papers were thrown away very, very carefully or they were stolen from a secure location (like a safe) in his home. How these documents found their way into a service station dumpster, we may never know. What we can be sure of, though, is that somebody at City Hall doesn’t understand the concept of the fourth amendment.

Employers have access to employee information like social security and bank account numbers for good reasons. We collect such information in order to facilitate proper payment, withholding and deposit of payroll. We must hold that information in strictest confidence. In a world where identity theft is an everyday threat, we are duty bound and ethically responsible to protect such privileged information from disclosure. It doesn’t matter who tossed these confidential documents into a public trash can. The problem is much larger. The problem is the someone’s blatant disregard for our employee’s constitutionally protected right to privacy. That this happened at all signals a serious gap in the city’s secu-

rity procedures and it simply cannot continue to happen.

Sadly, Mister Garth seemed fairly unconcerned about the error when he called last week to scold me for mentioning the matter on my website. He seemed more intent upon trying to frighten me with talk of lawyers and legal action. He said he was fed up with my “game playing.” (I wonder what part of my quest to unseat him and his cronies he thinks is simply my idea of a good time? Here’s a bulletin. I’m on a mission to clean up city hall. One would think he’d understand how serious I am about that by now.)

I’m afraid that Garth sees this grievous procedural breech as “no big deal.” In his usual swaggering arrogance, I suspect he thinks himself to be immune from the rules the rest of us mortals must follow. Remember this is the man who fires police officers for doing their job. He’s the guy who votes on personnel matters even though the City’s attorney advised him to recuse himself from the vote. He’s the guy who thinks he can spend specifically earmarked grant monies for his own purposes. He is the guy who uses the city gymnasium for his own private basketball practices without paying the customary rental fee. He’s the guy who thinks he doesn’t have to answer to taxpayers. All of this makes me even more certain that we must insist on closer citizen oversight. If we are to survive the next year with Cloyd Garth guarding the financial gates, I submit that it’s time for taxpayers to take a closer look at the city’s expenditures.

In the real world, boards of directors who attend meetings and direct operations spend part of every meeting hearing a treasurer’s report. The treasurer provides a list of bills payable and there is time for questions. We taxpayers ought to be able to see the list of payables *before* they are paid. It would simply be a matter of copying the list on the back of the agenda. This would provide time for questions and answers at the beginning of the meeting when comments by the citizenry are grudgingly heard. (Until recently the citizen input slot was left for last. These days, though, the time allotted for citizen input is at the BEGINNING of the agenda, thereby cleverly avoiding the painful public commentary that inevitably brews as the meeting moves along.)

They tell me love is blind. In my experience love can also be deaf, dumb and stupid. The same goes for allowing City government to move forward (or, in our case, backward) unchallenged. We can no longer just “guess”

the citizens’ money is being prudently spent on absolute necessities. Any confidence we might muster in the leadership provided by the likes of Cloyd Garth is seriously misplaced—it is leadership like his that, in this administration alone, cost Aberdeen’s taxpayers a whopping \$25,000 for insurance deductibles as a result of wrongful hiring/firing lawsuits. With Garth in the money management seat, what horrors await us? I shudder!



Your Municipal Officials

Honorable Cecil Belle, Mayor
125 West Commerce, Aberdeen
369-4165

Ward 1 Alderman Alonzo Sykes
1113 Elk Circle, Aberdeen
369-7705

Ward 2 Alderman Cloyd Garth
310 James Street, Aberdeen
369-5734

Ward 5 Alderman Willie Cook
505 South Matubba, Aberdeen
369-9156

Ward 4 Alderman Brunson Odom
1021 Murphree Circle,
Aberdeen
369-2246

Ward 5 Alderman Jim Buffington
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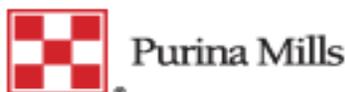


As you can see from the pictures above, the Animal Shelter is currently awash in kittens. Donations of dry kitten chow are desperately needed! Also gifts of laundry detergent and chlorine bleach are always appreciated.

Please find room in your heart and home to adopt one of these homeless pets.

Your kind support gives homeless pets in Aberdeen a chance at life and love.

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123 NORTH MAPLE STREET—ABERDEEN
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Silly Habit Continued from Page 1

further adieu, let's share some of the all-time classic goofs I've found the past two years on the news pages of the *Aberdeen Examiner* and *The Amory Advertiser*.

In a front page story in the March 8, 2006 *Advertiser*, Byrd set the tone for the entire article in his headline which read: "**Main Street starts second member drive.**" But then, in the first paragraph he states the Main Street Association, after a successful first year, "is gearing up for its second year membership drive." Big difference between second member drive and a second-year membership drive, wouldn't you agree? But wait, folks, it gets even better for he then failed to spell the very same town he grew up in correctly, using "**Armory**" instead of Amory – not once, not twice, but a grand total of **six** times in the same story.



Later that same month, he wrote a front page article on the upcoming Railroad Festival (which was to take place the next week), complete with a bold-faced headline. But he mistakenly plugged it as starting that Thursday (the day after the paper came out on Wednesday) instead of the following Thursday.

Two years ago, the *Examiner* carried the

tragic story of a student killed in a car crash, but Byrd attributed most of his quotes for the article to the Columbus *Commercial Dispatch*. With a telephone at his disposal and he Amory High School campus only a few miles from *The Advertiser* office, I couldn't figure out why he had to lift quotes from the *Dispatch* – the Journal Publishing Company's main rival in this neck of the woods.

But then I realized why he borrowed from another newspaper when I read the only quote he got on his own, which stated: "It has been real **quite** (quiet) here today. You can **here** (hear) a pin drop around the school today."

In another 2005 *Examiner* story, Byrd wrote: "HMA has agreed as part of the **sell** (sale) to continue plans for expanding the GMH women's center." Later in that same story, it was more of the same: "As a result of the **sell** (sale) of GMH..." Two more of my favorite Byrd offerings include the Amory Food **Panty** (Pantry) in *The Advertiser*, and a story in the *Examiner* in which homemade **crap** (crab) meltaways were served during the social hour.

One of my all-time favorite Byrd goofs came in a March 2006 story in which he quoted Monroe County school board member Mickey Miller as saying: "I think I'm getting the **wrap** (rap) of being **sole** (solely) athletic minded." Adding insult to injury, Byrd spelled Miller's first name "**Mikey**," a mistake he had previously made at least a couple of other times in different stories.

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Sometimes to confuse us, Byrd contradicts himself. For example, in a 2006 story in *The Advertiser*, he claimed a student injured in a collision with a school bus "**was the only person in the vehicle at the time of the wreck.**" But in the caption under the accompanying picture stated, "**The passenger of the vehiclw** (sic) **was transported to Tupelo for treatment.**" (As I was reading this, my question was how could the only person in the vehicle be the passenger? Then it came to me – maybe that's why he had the wreck, he was pretending to be the passenger instead of the driver. Silly me!)

Incomplete sentences have become his specialty, as have run-together sentences and comma splices, along with a complete lack of understanding of subject-verb agreement – all of which most journalism students learn to avoid early on in their college class work.

Then there are his sentences which don't make a lot of sense. For example,

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in a 2006 *Advertiser* story, he wrote: “*Lions provide a camp on the Gulf Coast for children who are blind or visually impaired in May.*” (My immediate thought was, “are children who are blind or visually impaired during the month of May the only ones who qualify for this camp?”) Byrd has also had dozens of stories which ended in mid-sentence, along with one article in which the final sentence of the story read: “*After many hours of consideration and conversations with others, I am making the following recommendations.*”

Numbers oftentimes confuse Byrd also (as they did when he was the sports editor), as when he wrote: “*Of those 179 students, 41 percent come from Hamilton High, 35 percent from Hatley High and 32 percent from Smithville.*” (41 + 35 + 32 = 108....hello!)

Cutline classics include the time he misspelled the word “merit” not once, not twice – but *three* times in the same caption. Not one to be consistent, incredibly enough he spelled the word two different ways – “*merrit*” (twice) and “*merritt*” (once). Sadly, I’d be willing to bet every scout in the picture knew how to spell the word “merit,” as in merit badge.

He also has the annoying habit of using the same word or phrase two and often three times in the same sentence. Too, there’s always the (see) “photo at right” which isn’t there; group pictures in which no one is identified; cutlines longer than some stories; misplaced or missing punctuation; and an overall lack of attention to detail – such as a birth announcement in *The Advertiser* back in January where the child’s name was Chloe Madison Murphy in the headline, but Jessica Renea Thompson in the story.

And how could we ever forget the following: *She invited us to tour her year which was a treat. She has it in full bloom.* (Pray

tell, she has her year in full bloom); *they are every honored to be given this great title; with as little as \$31 dollars; March 38-31; the plan will effect* (affect) *321 acres; and anyone are* (is) *welcome.*”

Byrd’s editing skills have to be questioned also. As an example, there was a short story written for a school page by a high school student which was published in the *Examiner* in which the student wrote: “*Students were allowed to walk around to meet colleges....and talk to colleges of their choosing.*” (Technically, the students didn’t meet and talk to colleges; they met and talked to representatives from those colleges.) Byrd then listed two colleges I wasn’t familiar with – *Poltastate* and *Rush*. In a Church Events column, he included no less than six different stories which should have been deleted that particular week because the dates listed for the events had already passed.



Spelling is not Byrd’s forte either, but last year, Byrd’s inattention to detail (and failure to use spell check) made a letter writer look bad when the following “words” appeared in a letter-to-the-editor on *The Advertiser’s* editorial page:

sstrange, interest, haveone, wwe and *ocuntry’s*. In an Upcoming Events article, he spelled Amory’s newest golf club three different ways (*Riverbirch, RiverBirch* and *River Birch*), and in a cutline which ran with a March of Dimes story in *The Advertiser*, Byrd spelled the word “kickoff” incorrectly twice, both of which were different – *kick off* and *kick-off*.

And finally, we have a small sampling of literally hundreds of misspelled words which have found their way into Byrd’s stories and captions the past two years, many of them quite unique (all of which would have been corrected had he bothered to use spell check): *botuique, included,*

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cit, Vicotria, damaged, education, centric, recipents, Georgie Gulf, recently, absorbant, Battefield, helpmeet, suppling, Zebulum, trianing, pursuring, Mircale, duiring, woking, Iterdisciplinary, prospecstive, duaghter, vehiclwacocuntant, versatle, fat-incerating, sweepst, standin, wbsite, calanders, detectice and chilren (This list does not include the many names he’s butchered, either.)

For sure, as a sports editor for over 25 years, I have had more than my fair share of typos and mistaken identities, but the vast majority of them were not what one would consider to be “ignorant” mistakes (hear/here, quiet/quite, their/there/they’re, affect/effect, etc). And believe me when I tell you I haven’t cherry-picked a few isolated mistakes to make Byrd look bad. I could have easily filled three *Advocates* with his goof-ups over the past two years, and it is my intention here to draw as much attention as possible as to the reasons why two of the best weekly newspapers in the state have turned into laughingstocks of the industry.

Next week: An equally damaging look at the sports pages.



Tues-Fri - 9-5
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Reflections

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Sheila and Hannah Higgins



The Aberdeen Advocate

THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

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