

On the subject of...

Watched pots

By Viki Eggers Mason



The Aberdeen Advocate

Although I have my handsome husband hoodwinked into believing otherwise, I really have very few virtues. Conspicuously absent from my repertoire is the virtue of patience. I simply do not have time to wait for things to happen in their own time. I want it all and I want it NOW!

As a girl on my grandparents' Eastern Oregon ranch, I was allowed to help plant the vegetable garden which was supposed to keep us in tomatoes, onions and peas. (When I say peas, I am not referring to the black-eyed beans you people insist upon calling peas. I'm talking about real peas—little round green legumes that come in handy pods.) I would plant the seed in the dirt, then go out at least once each day to dig them back up in order that I might accurately evaluate their progress. I worried my peas into oblivion. Fortunately for us, Grandmother planted some peas of her own which eventually did grow and produce pods.

Years later, after we'd moved to Montana, my mother would sit for hours on the porch of

our big log house in an effort to entice neighboring chipmunks close enough to her to take peanuts from her hands. She could also fish the same riffle in the creek (pronounced crick) for hours until she'd caught her daily limit and mine as well. Of course, she had an entirely different virtue set than my own.

As I got older, I did develop a small tolerance for waiting quietly. When you live in Montana where there are only three seasons in each year—July, August and winter—you must either learn to wait or you go stark raving mad from cabin fever. I may have learned to wait, but I never learned to like it.

For nearly two years now, I've waited for the conclusion of the State Auditor's investigation of the electric department's mismanagement. (In case you're new here, a couple of years ago evidence came into my hands that proved certain aldermen and other city employees have been supplying free electric services to some Aberdeensians in exchange for support at the polls

and other....um....how shall I put this....considerations.)

Since August of 2006, an investigator for the State Auditor has been scrutinizing the electric department's books and, as I understand it, the matter which started with something like \$30,000 worth of "write offs" just keeps getting wider and deeper. Mind you, the investigator does not say exactly that to me. Instead, he simply assures me that he is still digging. From that, I presume this situation must have a magnificent "root system" in which more than a few city employees are intertwined. Anyway, I've waited and I've waited and I've waited for criminal indictments to come. I'm still waiting.

I try, to no avail, to keep from dwelling on the subject. I concentrate on my job. I concentrate on this goofy little newspaper. From time to time, I even concentrate of the Discovery Channel, but it all comes back to Powergate when I close my eyes at night.

The building in which I live is huge. It represents 6,500

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Before I go....

As most of you know, after this edition only four more issues of the *Aberdeen Advocate* will be printed and distributed. I will still opine from time to time on my website but, beginning next month, I will no longer be chained to this desk and this keyboard and intend to spend some time enjoying my family. Since opportunities for me to chat with you this way are dwindling, I plan to do some wrapping up in each of these last editions.

Today I want to talk about our municipal hiring policies.

If you take the time to read the position announcements which run in the local newspaper when the city is looking for new employees, you will see that we talk the talk. We say we are seeking experienced people to work for the city. When you review the standard employment application or read our municipal employee manual, you will see that there are perfectly proper policies in place to cover these matters. If

you spend any time talking with any of the city employees, you will soon learn that those policies are not often followed.

In the past, it has been our unofficial policy to employ as many people as possible. We care less about qualifications than we do about the fact that our constituents can enjoy gainful employment at the expense of the taxpayers. This policy was the brainchild of aldermen who, for purposes of reelection,

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square feet of heating and cooling costs. Each month we contribute about a thousand dollars to the local electric department which is, under any circumstances, painful. When you consider the fact that those dollars may be funding political campaigns for Alonzo Sykes and Cloyd Garth, it sticks in my craw. (I've always wondered what a craw was, but since my dainty Grandmother had one in which things were frequently getting stuck, I'm probably genetically disposed to have one of my own even if I don't know where it is.)

As I've said before, I suspect Garth, Sykes and former alderman Willie A. Cook of using electric services as campaign currency or, probably more properly called current-cy. When those voters who cast multiple ballots in the last runoff election between Garth and opponent Wilchie Clay testified that they received nothing of value from Garth in exchange for their votes, I'm afraid that the "nothing" they received might be easily recognizable to you and me as a monthly utility bill. And, knowing a bit about the logic these folks employ, they might even have convinced themselves that if they were never billed for the electricity they used, they could truthfully (but not honestly) say that nobody gave them anything. Clever. Not smart, but clever.

Now, it isn't as though I have kept these suspicions to myself. I've made it clear to the Democrat Executive Committee and the Attorney General in a sworn statement about the evidence I have actually seen and held in my own hands. I have made it clear to the State Auditor's Office. Now, in order to maintain my grasp on the very slippery notion that the system works, I must keep an emotional lid on the pot I'm watching—a nearly impossible task for this particular pea-picker. (How's that for

mixing my metaphors, Mrs. Dunbar?)

Now, I know that you Mississippi Mafia fans will want to quickly tell the world that these scumbags have not yet been arrested because they have done nothing wrong. I know better. As I said, I've seen tens of thousands of dollars worth of evidence which was said to be "just the tip of the iceberg." I'm also very sure the State Auditor would not still be poking around in little old Aberdeen if he wasn't very sure his valuable time was being wisely spent. (Then again, I'm that crazy female who believes that the legal system always works when you let it. Unless, of course, you happen to be Orinthal James Simpson or William Jefferson Clinton.)

Then there is the matter of Almighty God. I'm more than a little confused about why He continues to allow Garth and Sykes to stand before congregations of trusting Christians, claiming to be servants of our Lord. Oh, I know. He will take care of the matter in His own time and in His own way. There I go again with that patience stuff. You would think He would remember about me and the peas. Or maybe this is a continuation of that same lesson. Shrug.

Back in my law office days, my boss handled many cases where unscrupulous lending companies would dupe unsuspecting, ignorant people out of their hard-earned money and property. It broke my heart when I would see these nice folks—some of whom could not read—who trusted the wrong people and ended up losing a lifetime's investment. It made me mad then. It makes me mad still. I hate that we live in a world where slick thugs can make a living preying on the poorest and neediest among us. But we need not look all the way to big cities and fancy offices. We have vultures enough of our own to deal with right here at home.

Here's an easy answer. What if our new aldermen made a policy stating that only the Mayor himself has the ability to "commute" somebody's power bill? There are very good reasons why some leniency should be built into the system. People sometimes have emergencies and should not have to choose between keeping the lights on or burying a parent. On the other hand, losing all your money in a poker game isn't a good excuse. The lamentable

cost of gasoline isn't a good excuse either, but walking to work in a Mississippi summer isn't my idea of a good time. Naturally, this would have to be carefully considered on a case by case basis.

As you might imagine, such a new policy would meet with instant opposition. Nevertheless, I still challenge our three new aldermen to take this bold step toward righting the wrongs of the past. It would not address the problems we currently have with people who are never billed and/or never disconnected for non payment, but, for that, I could surely find the patience to wait for the indictments to come. And come they will. Mark my words.

Your City Officials

Mayor

Honorable Jim Ballard
125 W. Commerce Street
Aberdeen, MS 39730
369-4165

Chief of Police
Henry Randle

125 West Commerce Street
Aberdeen, MS 39730
369-6454

Alderman, Ward 1

Alonzo Sykes
1113 Elk Circle
Aberdeen, MS 39730
369-7524

Alderman Ward 2 (Temporary)

Cloyd Garth
310 South James Street
Aberdeen, MS 39730
369-5734

Alderman, Ward 3

David Ewing
Post Office Box 1095
Aberdeen, MS 39730
369-9150

Alderman, Ward 4

Randy Nichols
Post Office Box 1161
Aberdeen, MS 39730
369-3352

Alderman, Ward 5

John Allen
1006 West Commerce Street
Aberdeen, MS 39730
369-4683



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want sturdy strings attached to as many voters as possible. And face it friends, there is no string sturdier than the one with money affixed to the other end.

In the past, I have moaned and groaned about this policy, calling it corporate cannibalism. It's still cannibalism, but today I want to discuss a different, more dangerous consequence of this bad policy.

In some departments, hiring from the bottom of the barrel isn't such a bad idea. One doesn't really need much training to push a lawnmower or scoop dirt out of storm drains. However, when it comes to the Police Department, the Fire Department and the Electric Department—departments where a single wrong move could result in injury or death—it is essential that we employ only the best trained, best qualified candidates we can possibly find. We need to cast our net far and wide and then be prepared to PAY these pre-trained, pre-qualified employees an excellent wage in order to keep them contented. That's just good business, a concept which has been lost on past city administrations.

I have watched for years as our aldermen bestow these dangerous jobs on men and women who have no training whatsoever. Untrained employees can be paid less and, as a bonus, they will be

more "grateful" to us for giving them the opportunity of a lifetime!

Today there are police officers patrolling our streets wearing badges and carrying guns who have not yet spent the first day in the Police Academy! We also have at least one armed officer who recently *failed* the police academy, but she has an uncle in very high places and, consequently, will be given as many chances as she needs to "catch on" to police work.

Our fire department had the opportunity several years ago to hire a fireman with a stellar career who has been awarded the title of "smoke eater." I'm told this distinction is something like the "Congressional Medal of Honor" of the firefighting world. Nevertheless, we passed over this man, probably because he was more qualified than our (appointed) Fire Chief. Besides, fledgling firemen will eventually "catch on." (And you and I can hope the "catching" they do won't be "on fire.")

Over the past few years, the electric department has seen the resignation of several well-trained linemen. The problem is, of course, they can get better paying jobs in other, nearby communities. And so we begin the training process again. We hire novices for pittance and hope that they will eventually "catch on" to electric

work. We also hope they will not make any errors because errors in this department are deadly. (Unless you work in the office where you can get away with lots of stuff.)

Yesterday, I passed an electric department maintenance crew as it was repairing power lines on Commerce Street. Two young men were hoisted aloft in bucket trucks and, on the ground looking very worried, was longtime lineman David Brock. I was forced to remember something he told me



many months ago.

"They can't learn this stuff on the ground, so we send them up there. Then we pray a lot," he said. "It just takes one little mistake...."

Bad hires, like the one which took place when we replaced the municipal clerk with a woman who had no legal experience and who still doesn't know what an arraignment is, are terrible business decisions. Bad hires for departments where mistakes can kill are not just bad business, they are indefensible!

As you carry on with the business of running Aberdeen without me, reader friends, please take the time to call your alderman and ask him to budget better pay for employees whose lives are on the line every day. And, while you're at it, plead with them to stop hiring unqualified, unskilled employees who will, in the end, cost the taxpayers untold thousands of dollars in litigation. It's time to run the City of Aberdeen like the big business it is instead of treating it like a lemonade stand in an Our Gang comedy!

Puzzlers—just for fun.

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Unscramble these words to find matters of concern for Aberdeen's citizens! Answer key found elsewhere in this edition.



The Aberdeen Advocate

112 EAST WASHINGTON STREET
ABERDEEN, MS 39730
662.369.0449

Email: AberdeenAdvocate@bellsouth.net
viki@vikimason.com

<http://vikimason.com>



The Aberdeen Advocate is committed to the goal of improving the quality of life in Aberdeen and Monroe County by identifying and exposing waste and mismanagement in Government. To these ends we humbly offer our observations and opinions.

“Why put a word scramble puzzle in this paper, you ask? Well, it seems to be the only way Rowe will let me get away with creative spelling. Of course, the idea of people standing on their heads to read the answer key appealed to me too.”
...Viki Eggers Mason

management = tneamdnatgnae
security = irtsucl
hurricane = ehacneru
tornado = dnarot
preparedness = sseuprednpsae
enforcement = tnefneemcot
zoning = gnuoz
planning = gnidnpl
integrity = tynitrg
honesty = tseuon
jobs = sfoj
businesses + businesses = ssnbses + snbsesses
accountability = tnylbtactoi
tourism = tnuisr
industry = tdnruys