

On the subject of...

City Jobs — Re-election Currency

by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

Nearly two years ago, I wrote a piece for the Aberdeen Examiner entitled "Corporate Cannibalism." (You can find it on my website archives if you're inclined to read it.) As I told you then, increasing the city payroll in order to create jobs for Aberdeenians is just plain stupid. I told you then when government becomes the largest employer in an area, it is a recipe for fiscal failure. Feasting on our own flesh was stupid then and it was still stupid at the June 5th meeting of the board of aldermen when the decision was made to hire 35 (that is thirty-count 'em-five!) additional people for the summer.

"Our youth needs jobs!" Willie Cook said passionately. "They need work and we have to give it to them to keep them off the streets."

Excuse me? At what point did inventing busy-work for local kids become the responsibility of Aberdeen's already overburdened taxpayers? When did we agree to become an OJTA? (On the Job Training Academy.) Never, that's when.

To make matters much worse, in creating new jobs we are ignoring the (bought and paid-for) advice of our accountant, Dale Pierce. Each year, Pierce tells the city its payroll is out of

control. Each year, he comes to the board to plead with the aldermen not only to stop hiring new folks, but also to eliminate jobs by attrition whenever possible. Then, of course, our aldermen blithely ignore his advice and knit new employment possibilities out of the flimsy yarn of entitlement. This latest hiring fit represents a 35% increase in our employee roster for the summer months.

To his certain credit, alderman Jim Buffington (a man who served for years as the chairman of the finance committee) was on his toes that evening. During the discussion, he asked no less than five times, "Where is the money to pay these people going to come from?" As it turns out, Buffington's question was never answered. Clearly, Cloyd Garth, who has been finance committee chairman for over a month now, either didn't know or didn't care if there was money to fund the new hires. Oh, joy! Oh sweet security! Our financial future is in the hands of a nincompoop!

Of course Aberdeen needs job opportunities! Our lovely little community is withering away economically. We are

in a full-fledged depression here and, as far as I'm concerned, you can lay the blame at the feet of whom-ever was responsible for impaneling the current school administration.

Over the years I've had countless conversations with folks who pinpoint the beginning of Aberdeen's tumble toward bankruptcy at about 1995. It was then when school superintendent Lavon Fluker-Reed was hired. Shortly thereafter, the phenomenon locally called "white flight" began. I wasn't here and I cannot say much about how and why this happened. What I can tell you, though, is how it is hurting us today.

It is tempting to hope Toyota's new facility near Tupelo will bring jobs to Aberdeen. It's foolish, but it's tempting just the same. Jobs come to town when businesses do. Businesses locate in communities which have low taxes and high educational standards. Aberdeen can claim neither.

Businesses want a well-educated pool of potential employees from which to

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Uncle Felix and the Power Inside

by Contributing Editor R. T. Mason

I never knew Uncle Felix. He was returned to his Maker 10 years before my own grand entry into this world, but according to my dad's stories of him, Uncle Felix was a man given to great thought. He was my dad's uncle because Felix was married to my dad's mother's sister. (I have to

make sure that the reader understands that we aren't talking about blood kin here. Our gene pool is shallow enough without any help from others.)

One of the Uncle Felix stories I found particularly revealing concerned Uncle Felix and his theory of cultivation. Uncle Felix was

inspecting one of his cotton fields one day, when my grandfather approached him. Together, they looked over the field. My grandfather couldn't help but notice the first row was planted a considerable distance from the edge of the field. When my grandfather asked him

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choose. Businesses must locate in places where their management staff is willing to actually live. Management staffs generally involve families with children. In addition to excellent schools, families with children want homes and, while they may see Aberdeen's low real estate prices as a plus, they are also likely to realize that high property taxes and a "going nowhere" government which takes planning and zoning responsibilities lightly will make resale of those homes unlikely down the line. Aberdeen may see a few jobs as a result of Toyota, but they won't happen here in our little town - those jobs will almost certainly involve a commute. People may buy houses, but they will probably be located outside our city limits in the county, where educational expectations are higher and real estate actually appreciates rather than depreciates.

If the education fairy were to drop in today and transform Aberdeen's schools into the best Mississippi has to offer, (which would still make them among the worst in the nation) I believe it would still take at least 20 years to overcome the damage that's been done in the past decade. The question is this: how long can we continue this free-fall? My friends, we need a parachute and we need it NOW!

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I see only one alternative to corporate failure. As I see it, we have exactly one hope

for an economic up-tick in the near future. That hope is tourism.

Tourism is the only industry I know which doesn't demand excellence in education. Tourism jobs are mainly entry-level, so a dismally educated employee pool will suffice.

We've been blessed with abundant tourism "product." All we need do now is to turn our hefty potential into cold, hard cash. We need more fishing and boating events. Why are there no paddle wheelers churning the waters of our waterway doing dinner/theatre? Where are the casinos, anyway? Why do we not promote our fine sports complex? Tournaments can mean mega-money! We must find new and creative ways to display our rich history and cultural heritage.

Ripe and relatively untouched is the cultural plum otherwise known as "back history." I was delighted earlier this spring during the Pilgrimage to see, at long last, Aberdeen's black community taking advantage of the opportunity to show and tell how their generations have helped bring us to today. I hope that this participation will continue to grow. Their stories need telling.

Tourism is an industry which demands little in the way of police and fire protection, so it requires very little money down to get started. It takes just a little planning and a few well-placed advertising dollars.



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Properly promoted, even a modest tourism boom could inject enough money into the community to begin to drive taxes downward. That is, of course, if we were ever bright enough to elect an all-new, improved city government with just a little vision. Yes, new beginnings all around are the key to our hopes for the future.

Meanwhile, we limp along using tired old strategies and achieve the same grim results. When the citizens clamor for jobs, we simply set them to suckle at the corporate udder, in effect, double spending the taxpayer's cash. Pleased with our cleverness, we happily point to the fact that we (read our benevolent aldermen) have taken the plight of the children into account and have, indeed, made jobs appear as if by magic. "Ain't we special?" "Ain't you glad you elected us?" "Now, we took care of you...you'll take care of us next year at election time, right?"

Wink. Wink. Nudge. Nudge.



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Uncle Felix and the Power Inside

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why he left that space unplanted, Uncle Felix's response was, "Them outside rows never make anything, anyway." Now, what can one say to that kind of logic?

The fact that, no matter where you start planting, you're still going to have an outside row was lost on Uncle Felix. There has to be an outside to get to the inside, and that brings me to the real topic of this article.

Every year, Viki and I make a pilgrimage to either Vicksburg or Shiloh. Personally, I prefer Shiloh, simply because it is more quiet and serene. But there are casinos in Vicksburg where my blushing young bride can invest relatively hard-earned cash in the waiting mouths of colorful machines, which easily redistributes our small wealth to the owners of the casino – a transaction much like paying taxes, but I digress.

Scattered about these Civil War battlefields are monuments, shrines dedicated to the soldiers of various states and units that fought there. There are also museums containing artifacts found on the battlefield, and there are movies which describe the battles and the strategies of both sides. It's a real learning experience and we do learn something every time we visit these battlefields. Learning, though, isn't the main purpose of our visits.

In the 226 years of our country's existence, soldiers and sailors from this nation—members of our families—have struggled in hundreds of battles all over the world. They waded ashore through the bloody waters of Normandy, Iwo Jima and many other beaches while machine gun rounds and mortar-fire filled the air. They have endured the heat of North Africa,

Kuwait and Iraq, and they have endured the freezing mountain cold of Korea. They have waded across the rice paddies and marched through the dense jungles of Vietnam. They have toiled in the bowels of our ships as exploding rounds from torpedoes and enormous guns shook their very being.

One might argue that wars are fought in order for rich men to get richer. One might argue that wars are nothing more than power-grabs perpetrated by raving lunatics. One might even argue that some military leaders have done what they did in the quest for glory at any cost. What can't be argued, though, is the reason those soldiers and sailors fought so hard, and why they were willing to sacrifice themselves. They did it for their families. They did it for their children. They did it for you and they did it for me. They did it in order that freedom might live on; that it might live in the hearts and minds of their children and their children's children.

Memorial Day, D-Day, Veterans' Day and Independence Day are all days which have been dedicated to the remembrance of our freedom and the sacrifices of those soldiers and sailors who fought to maintain that freedom. In my humble opinion, there is no better place to observe that remembrance than at one of our battlefields. Millions of us visit these battlefields every year. We learn a little, we have our pictures taken beside some of those great monuments, and we go home with very little real understanding. One who has never fought in a war can never completely comprehend the dimensions of it, yet that comprehension is the importance of these battlefields, and it is possible for us to attain a considerable amount of understanding after several visits.

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When we quietly stand beside the Bloody Pond at Shiloh and let our minds hear the sounds of cannon and musket, we can feel the fear, we can feel the pain of wounds washed in that bloody water, and we can better understand the motivations and sacrifice of those who fought for us. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this."



So, we can stay outside and can observe Memorial Day, or any of these days of remembrance with a camping trip or a barbecue, or we can go inside our battlefields where we can learn to feel and comprehend. Being inside is sometimes scary; it's sometimes lonely, but it can fill your soul with understanding and love – a love for your ancestors, your countrymen, your country and your freedom. In our dog-eat-dog world, it is amazing to find peace, love, comfort and understanding on a field of revolting carnage. Who knows? It might even help propel you to the polls next election day. Now you know why we go inside.

Maybe Uncle Felix was on to something. When the inside is opened, it isn't nearly as scary. Feeling and understanding give comfort, and the on-going struggle for freedom, in this mad world of politicians and suicide bombers, becomes worthwhile.

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