

PREPARED FOR WIN LIBBYMEMORIAL SERVICENewman Center, May 11, 1993

There is nothing I can add to the portrait of Win Libby as a teacher, an educator, an administrator and a public official, set forth by those who have spoken here today.

They have spoken with the authority of those who knew him and knew the problems of his time and how he dealt with them. I share their estimate of him, not as an intimate, or a co-worker on this campus, but as an outsider.

Some mysterious insight like that which guided the Tibetans historically in the discovery of a re-incarnated Lama, must have governed the authorities of the Land Grant College System to prompt them to pick out a child of Aroostook County, embodying all the virtues required to manage this unique institution, the University of Maine.

PAGE TWO

But I am here to speak of him not as an educator but as a writing colleague--a colleague who, for 18 years from 1973 to 1991, wrote a column for The Ellsworth American called "Thoughts While Shaving."

It has his choice of a title. His "Thoughts While Shaving" turned out to be more cheerful, felicitous, and relevant than my own thoughts while shaving.

Most men are not in very good form at that task or that hour of the day. What they see in the mirror is not ordinarily a sight to gladden the heart but a sight that arouses dismay at the ravages of time. My own view of this scene is also soured by the sound of an electric razor, the performance of which each morning arouses my anger and provokes my indignation at the man who keeps saying on television that it shaves as close as a blade while it does not.

But Win Libby had good thoughts while shaving, as his readers can all attest.

PAGE THREE

He had, moreover, a modesty uncommon to my own profession (and my own generation). In a column on January 24, 1976 he dared to say: "It is clear that age does not necessarily bring new insights and great wisdom." Few of us would admit that.

Also, from time to time, he was not afraid to challenge accepted wisdom. In a day when children are sovereign, he dared to say: "I am beginning to suspect that mother-abuse by children is a critical product of our civilization."

His columns were not often bitter, but one came close to it when he said: "The inability of the American people to accept or even to recognize their indebtedness to the American farmer has always concerned me."

One homely truth to which his column often returned was put in print in June 1976. He wrote, "An economic system resting on small enterprise is the ideal basis for a democratic society."

PAGE FOUR

One sentence he wrote in June 1977 may explain why he was able to get along so well with a student body. He said: "Like it or not, the young, as they come along, year by year, shape the fate of our country and its institutions."

Occasionally, Win Libby had his doubts about the welfare state. He wrote: "We are in danger of creating a culture of cynicism where the very gullible are to be pitied and protected."

He was a frequent critic of practises in his own field of forestry, but he totted up his judgment in February 1977 to write: "As far as I am concerned, Maine, under the present pattern of woods operation, is considerably better off than it might have been if forests had been left untouched or these land tracts had been subdivided into farms or industrial sites."

Win Libby was so interested in so many things that he escaped boredom. He wrote in 1982: "A person who is bored with himself is apt to be boring to others."

Although Win Libby was mostly cheerful in his columns and always even tempered, he did have an occasional grouse. Notably in a 1991 column he wrote: "Our computer age is really quite depressing in terms of how completely it has eliminated most reactions between living, breathing people."

Once and a while an attack on the institutions or conventions he cherished would produce a defensive protest like this column in July 1986 at a time when there were some press attacks on the University. He wrote: "The University of Maine system is a fine organization dedicated to providing better educational opportunity at all levels to the people of Maine. It still needs understanding and support to continue its mission of work for the best interests of the people of Maine."

PAGE SIX

A spate of advice, in print, for Aroostook County produced this little response: "Aroostook County has always been blessed by a regular and major crop of advisors telling the people what must be done to restore economic health to the County." (1987)

And once in a while, he gave vent to some gloomy apprehension, as in a column in January 1988: "The values and standards of the American people have steadily declined in the past quarter of a century. We seem willing to accept this gradual erosion of our values." (Column Jan. 1, 1988)

"Thoughts While Shaving" was not parochial or provincial in its topical variations. Win Libby had great concern about national policy and world affairs, interests that he frequently wrote about. But he was a Maine man in his outlook, his recollections, and his affections. He wrote characteristically in May 1976:

“Maine has a character all its very own. I feel it. I like it. I cannot describe it adequately. It is a complex of a modest people living with modest resources. We are part of it all. Superficially it is a conglomerate of spruce, fir, birches, white churches, splendid old homes in shabby little towns, pot holes in the roads, maples in full bloom, loaded pulp trucks, jonquils naturalized along the southern exposures of many homes, beer cans along the highway, fog sifting through the trees, kids playing in school yards, For Sale signs, lobster traps piled outside workshops, and mobile homes. Above all else, though, Maine is people, warm and friendly, honest and realistic. Without its people, the Maine environment would be sterile indeed.”

Win wrote on May 10, 1991, saying he had decided to drop writing "Thoughts While Shaving," after writing some 900 columns.

PAGE EIGHT

I wrote him a few days later expressing my disappointment at finding that I had been mistaken in assuming that our conversations of 18 years ago involved a permanent connection. But I had to yield to his decision. I find that I, too, generally tire of a job after 20 years or so.

So he left us, but he left a legacy, embodied forever in the files, the 900 columns of thoughtful and reflective comment. It is a privilege to turn to them, from time to time, to read again the words of a gifted, kind and gentle man.

xxxx

by  
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