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EDITOR'S NOTE

Storytelling evolves to reflect its era

By Jeannine Guttman

Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

Sunday, March 25, 2007

The opening paragraph weighed in at 91 words - not counting the dateline. Written nearly 70 years ago, it captured the plight of the lost Boy Scout found alive in the Maine wilderness. It read:

"Sherman, July 25 - A saga of the Northern Maine wilderness more thrilling than any that has come out of that region of high adventure and Indian legend in many a year was written late today on the banks of the East Branch of the Penobscot River, eight miles from Stacyville, when Donn Fendler, 12-year-old Rye, N.Y., lad, lost on Mount Katahdin eight days ago, for whom hundreds of men had conducted a search and for whom hope practically had been abandoned, was found alive by Nelson McMoarn, proprietor of a sporting camp."

Whew.

You had to admire that lead - or first paragraph - as a wonderful piece of newspapering history. But it is highly doubtful that you would want to replicate it in any newspaper today.

Journalism has changed as our world has changed. The craft can be viewed as a cultural barometer, constantly moving and adjusting to shifts in language, mores and communication styles.

That lead from our July 26, 1939, newspaper was extraordinary by today's journalistic standards. It is very wordy, full of clauses and commas. And the news of the day that the boy was found alive - was tucked toward the end of the sentence. It took readers awhile to get there.

Still, as our night editor, David McNabb, noted: "Well, it did tell you everything you needed to know."

Yes, it did. And all in one sentence.

We dug out that story from our archives last week, when a 12-year-old Boy Scout was rescued from the North Carolina mountains.

Given that high-profile search, we thought it would be interesting to talk to Fendler, now 80. His story is well-known in Maine, thanks to a book, "Lost on a Mountain in Maine." Over the generations, it has become almost mandatory reading for youngsters in this state.

Reporter Elbert Aull tracked down Fendler last week for an interview. Fendler, who lives in Clarksville, Tenn., told Aull about the trauma of being lost in the woods: "You're out there alone in the middle of the night. You really are scared."

Fendler, who had followed the news stories about the North Carolina Scout, told Aull there was a lesson in his experience: "Never give up. Everybody has that inside of them, whether they know it or not. If you give up, you're through."

Rereading that 1939 article about Fendler shows us how much journalism changes, day to day, decade to decade, to reflect its time.

It's an old saw to call journalism the "first rough draft of history." But that is indeed what it is. And that history is being written in real time, by the people who experienced it at some emotional level.

As daily historians, we try to capture events as accurately and authentically as possible. With interviews, words and photographs, we seek to create a vivid portrait of the people living in this place, in this time.

Whether we have succeeded is a question for history.

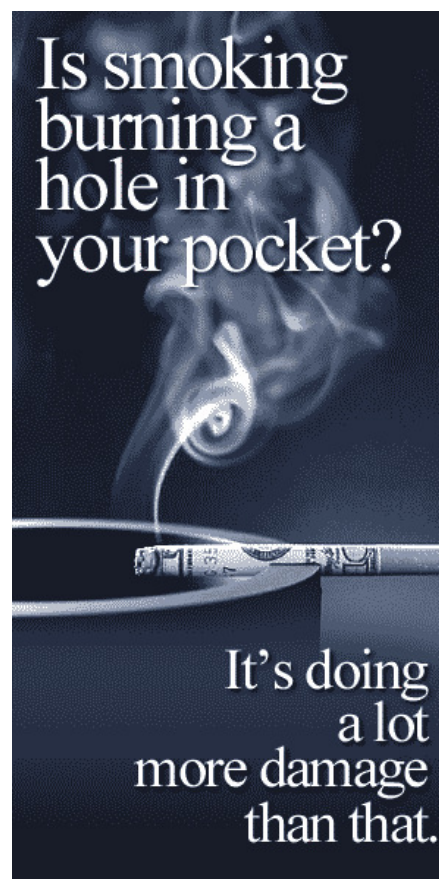
Imagine the time-capsule test. Somewhere in Maine, a person buries a time capsule containing copies of our newspaper.

In 150 years, someone digs up that capsule. And she'll remove the copies of the newspaper. And she'll read.

And the test of our journalism will be this: Will that person truly understand how we lived our lives in Maine in 2007? From the journalism of our newspaper, will that future Mainer get an accurate view of what kind of people we were?

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Will she understand our trials and wishes, our hopes and worries?

In those stories of 150 years ago, will she see herself?

If the newspaper adequately captured what it was like to live in 2007, to be a part of Maine, to be a part of the world, then the answer would be yes. And we would have accomplished our goal.

The newspaper story from 1939 certainly did that. A run-on sentence, yes. Difficult cadence, yes.

A clear window into life in 1939, yes.

That story reflected its time, freezing a moment, just as a photograph does. It enabled you to feel the effect of Fendler's disappearance - and understand the community's relief when he was found alive.

Although the manner in which stories are told changes over time, the value of storytelling is timeless. Through this art form, we learn about ourselves and others, navigating our way through the world.

How powerful is storytelling? Last week, Donn Fendler found his life suddenly linked to that of the young man from North Carolina. And vice versa.

By witnessing that connection, and understanding it, we were all connected - and renewed.

In that way, storytelling keeps us all from feeling alone and lost, abandoned in the wilderness.

Jeannine Guttman is editor and vice president of the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram. Send e-mail to jguttman@pressherald.com or write to 390 Congress St., Portland, ME 04101.

Reader comments

Cheryl Oakes of Wells, ME
Mar 27, 2007 5:29 AM

Jeannine,

This was brilliant! I've read the article many times and decided to incorporate some of your quotes in my blog account. Thanks for writing such great 'prose'.

I post on Tuesdays at techlearning.com/blog

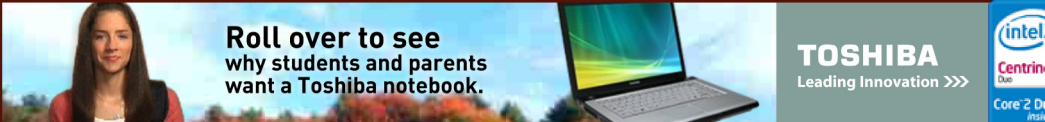
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