

A playwright's launching pad

By Dan Needles

The Citizen and I share birthdays and are exactly the same age. The new paper was the brainchild of Tom Claridge and his partner Harry White, another Shelburne native who had been a friend of my family since I was about eight years old. Tom and Harry were going head to head in competition with the old Thomson weekly in Orangeville, The Banner.

I had just finished a degree in economics at University of Toronto and the only thing I was certain of was that I had no future as an economist.

Harry came to the family farm in Rosemont looking for my sister to see if she wanted a job and instead he found me surrounded by a motley collection of veal calves, pigs and ducks. He couldn't believe that I was sitting there with a university education and all the prospects in the world and to his eyes, doing nothing.

"You have to get your ducks in a row," he said and offered me a job on the spot, writing stories for the Citizen.

We opened for business in the Broadway Cleaners building on the main street, right beside the Town Hall, in September, with an editor, whose name I conveniently have forgotten, because on the third day, the police came around and picked him up and that was the last we saw of him.

So Harry turned to me with his big grin and said, "You took some English courses, didn't you? Do you want to be editor?"

I have a lasting picture in my mind of Harry the salesman, standing by the front window in our new office, in his crisp white shirt and tie and a coffee cup in hand. Absolutely nothing was happening - the phone silent, the copy hook empty and nothing but flyers in the morning mail. With a big smile and a shrug of the shoulders he would say, "I think I'll take a walk up the street and let a parking brake off and see if I can generate some news."

It was a trick to fill a 16-page newspaper with local news in a town of 7,000 people. There was a strong temptation to lunge for the boiler plate bulletins from the agricultural office about the advance of the alfalfa weevil or planting tips for winter wheat.

We had contests to think of the silliest headline in a town with no news. "Snow falls on Broadway?" or worse, "Still no snow on Broadway?". And, at 23, I really had no opinions worth repeating for the editorial page.

Tom supplied our opinions like clockwork every week from his berth at the Globe and Mail in Toronto.

The first week Harry asked, "Why don't you write a column?" So I wrote out a title, "Letter from Wingfield Farm" and started telling stories about the two- and four-footed characters on the Seventh Line of Mono Township.

Over the next two years, Harry became the Dear Ed, in that column, reading the first draft, usually Monday morning, a few hours before we went to press.

Making Harry laugh was my weekly objective. If I could make Harry smile I knew there was a chance someone else out there in the readership would wade through it. There were plenty of opportunities to abandon the effort. Like the time I did a rant about snowmobiles and had the Kinsman Club and the small engine repair shop write irate letters to the editor telling me to go back to news reporting.

For several years after I left the Citizen I looked back at the experience as an interesting speedbump on the road of life. But then, in 1984, I gathered up the stories from the columns and fashioned them into a stage play, Letter from Wingfield Farm, and so began the

Wingfield series which is now the longest running series of stage plays in Canadian theatre history.

I returned to Broadway soon after to the Theatre Orangeville stage, right next door to the old Broadway Cleaners office, and went on to write 14 plays for them. Tom and Harry continued to be cheerleaders for my work and were delighted that the Citizen, Theatre Orangeville and Dufferin County would prove to be the launching pad for a young playwright and propel me to a national career in the theatre.

As Harry used to say, ?Mighty oaks from little nuts doth grow.?