

Miles McMillin reflects on life and "The Times"

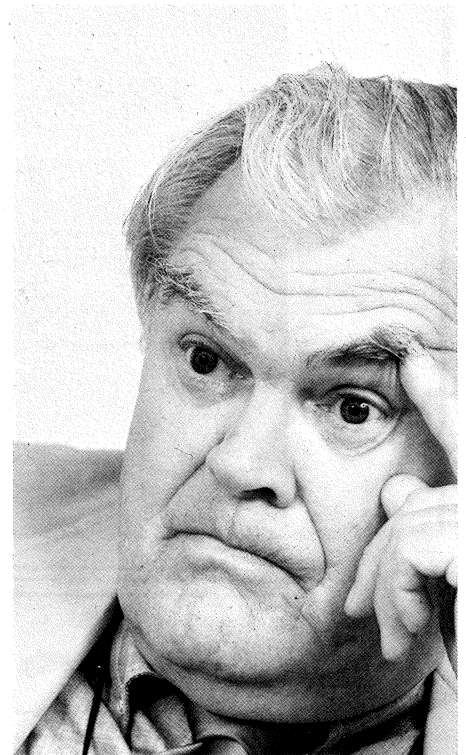
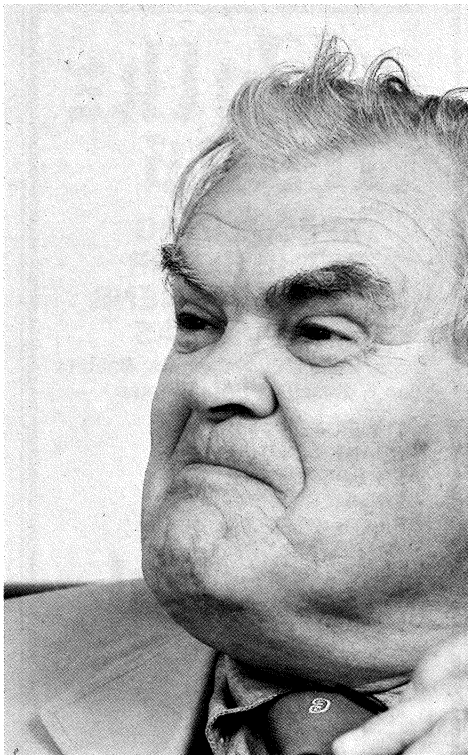
It was the first time Miles McMillin and I had met since the strike against Madison Newspapers, Incorporated. Now, he was retired, living in the Adirondack Mountains in New York State

George Vukelich writes a regular outdoor column for Madison magazine and also writes on a variety of other subjects.

and flying back to Madison "about every month" for the board meetings of the Capital Times. Sometimes he passed through on his way to Rochester, Minnesota, where he was being treated for cancer at the Mayo Clinic. On his last trip to Madison, we talked all morning in Jim Selk's office, and then right through lunch. Mostly,

Mac talked. This is a little bit of what he said.

"I used to be crazy about traveling," he says. "God, I hate it now. I just hate it. All I'm saying is, I'm getting damn old. I'll be seventy years old next March and all my old colleagues, they're all up there in the Great Press Room in the sky. A free canteen."



BILL FRITSCH

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"When you get the verdict that THAT wart is there and WORKING, you do some very serious thinking about life and whether you're gonna stick around."

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The way he chuckles reminds you of Cedric Parker.

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Mac was with the *Capital Times* for 33 years, from 1945 to 1978.

He succeeded Charlie Holmberg, who got a brain tumor and had the operation and didn't survive it. Charlie had been William T. Evjue's amanuensis. He wrote letters for Evjue and Evjue dictated editorials to him.

Mac was practicing law and working for Bob La Follette and *The Progressive* with Morris Rubin. When Charlie died, Evjue wanted Mac to take his place, and Mac didn't want to go over there.

"Evjue was a goddam tough guy to work for," he recalls, "so I made an arrangement that I would write editorials for him without working there. He would pay me per editorial. Well, he kept at me and kept at me and after about six months, I finally agreed to go work for him. Oh, I've never regretted it. Jesus, I've regretted it a thousand times."

Mac denies that there was any "special" relationship between himself and The Old Man—that he was the "son" that Evjue never had.

"No," he says. "I was close to him because I appreciated him as a personality. He was a fantastic guy and he did it the hard way. He went around and sold stock in the *Capital Times* during World War I when all the hysteria was on and any merchant who advertised in it would be subject to a breakup . . ."

He cites a particular conversation on a drive to Milwaukee for a ball game.

"You know," he told The Old Man, "if you had come in to sell me stock in a newspaper like that in a town where there already were three newspapers, I'd have thrown you out of the office for insulting my intelligence."

The Old Man, Mac swears, never got over that. He'd bring it up every morning: *Jesus Christ, Mac, you would have thrown me out of your office?*

"He did it the hard way," Mac concedes, "built the damn thing and you can't say he ever kow-towed to adver-

Evjue never gave you anything, McMillin says. Their arrangement was tough, business-like, and he almost quit more than once.

tisers. He got rich by insulting his best customers, by getting them mad. Morgan Manchester wouldn't speak to him for

years. He said: 'I'll come over and talk to McMillin but I won't talk to Evjue.' There are quite a few in this community who did that."

While Mac never felt himself the "heir apparent" to the *Capital Times*, he did feel that his chances were as good as anybody's because while he and The Old Man did not share the same blood line, they did share a bond that was almost as strong: *They both loved politics.*

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"Steve," Mac says, "George Stephenson was the guy that most people expected would get the paper. He was in family, been on the paper for a long time, but Steve's big problem with Evjue was that Steve wasn't interested in politics. And you know, *politics*, that was food for Evjue. Politics was what kept him alive. That's why he got into the newspaper business. He started the *Capital Times* because of political fights over La Follette."

"I didn't concur in everything Gottlieb did but I was not going to be sitting in, second-guessing the guy in charge."

Evjue never gave you anything, Mac says. Their arrangement was tough, business-like, and he almost quit more than once. In the middle of fights, The Old

Man would come to the door and yell at him: *Take the afternoon off! But you better be back here tomorrow morning!*

Once, Mac had a job offer from San Francisco and Evjue read about it in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. He was furious—as much by being scooped as by anything.

He raised Mac's salary. Mac never left.

The only truly rough time, he remembers, was at the end when The Old Man just hung on and hung on.

"He really got quite senile," Mac says, "and he had to be active. He would not give up anything. You just try and put out a daily paper with a guy who doesn't remember five minutes later a decision or a policy he had agreed with. 'Why did *this* happen?' he would ask."

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We were having dinner at Poole's Northgate one night. Mac, William T. Evjue. Fred Gage, then general manager of WIBA. And me. I was there as the AFTRA shop steward. Eventually, the majority of the union members would

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vote the union out, but that's another story. All during the meal, The Old Man kept eyeing me like I was from the moon. Mac finally noticed.

"This is Papa Hambone," he told The Old Man. "He works for you."

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The Old Man was dead when the strike against MNI started in October of 1977. Some people thought William T. Evjue would never have let it happen. Some people thought Mac would never let it happen either.

"I think," he says, "the strike was largely orchestrated in Washington. I've got a number of oldtime friends in the labor movement—guys like Andy Bie-miller who just died—Andy and Bob Tehan and Mr. Cutty Sark spent a lot of time planning and building the Democratic Party there. And Andy said it: 'There was a pattern there.' The Newspaper Guild, particularly, thought they could establish precedents by getting concessions out of the *Capital Times*.

"They—the Guild—used to intimidate the hell out of Evjue. Evjue wanted to go to his grave without a strike on his record and I was in the Guild in those days. Hell, I know damn well how we used to play on that."

Mac says that when he assumed the bargaining responsibility for the *Capital Times*, the Guild employed the same strategy on him. He cites the unfair labor practice charge the Guild brought against the *Times* when the paper instituted an ethics code for its staff.

"Every other paper in the country that had an ethics code," he scoffs, "didn't bargain it. I mean the *Washington Post* didn't bargain it. The *Louisville Courier-Times* didn't bargain it. The *Associated Press* didn't bargain it. The *Milwaukee Journal* didn't bargain it. Everybody who had a code simply put it in effect.

"But when we did it, the Guild headquarters in Washington said: 'Bring an unfair labor practice charge.' They felt, you know, that they had a liberal paper that they could force into line by threatening actions like that."

Even more rankling was a Guild "action" that pre-dated the MNI strike by five years.

"Hell," he recalls. "The only paper in the United States when the Guild struck the *Associated Press* in 1972—the only paper in the country that the Guild boycotted AP copy on was the *Capital*

Times. And we had just signed a contract with them.”

He called in Dave Zweifel, then a Guild Local 64 officer, and protested.

“What the hell is this,” he asked Zweifel. “We just signed this contract and now we’re gonna pay the price of being the Guild paper in Wisconsin that can’t use AP copy. I said you’re not gonna get away with this. I’m gonna bring an unfair labor charge against you. He said: ‘God, you won’t do that.’ I said the hell I won’t and I brought it and the Labor Board stuck it to them.”

“But we were the only paper the Guild picked out in that one. And I think the whole damn thing in the MNI strike was that they—the Guild and the printers—thought I would give in on the new processes.”

The new processes were the Harris Video Display Terminals that literally enabled reporters to prepare “cold type” copy at their desks, in effect eliminating printers’ jobs in the composing room. At MNI, when the printers struck on October 1, 1977, all five unions at the plant—including the Newspaper Guild—refused to cross the picket lines.

“The printers were *out of business*,” Mac says with some emphasis. “I said this to some of the Guild members: ‘You guys are practicing necrophilia. You’re crawling into bed with a corpse.’”

“*The printers are out of business. They’re obsolescent. They shouldn’t be around at all. What they were doing—look at the New York Daily News—There was the biggest newspaper in the United States, losing money because they’ve got a contract with the printers which pays the printers an average of \$15 a week more than anybody else gets there—and about half the printers never show up for work. They don’t have to work. I don’t give a damn, you’re not going to keep a newspaper or any other kind of business going that way. You just can’t do it here. The Milwaukee Journal, I don’t know how many of them they’ve got—seventy or eighty printers—who come down with nothing to do but sit around. Well, if you’re wealthy as the Milwaukee Journal, you can do that, but you can’t do it on a paper this size.*”

Mac insists that the printers at MNI knew that the new technology was coming in and their jobs were going out, that, in the 1975 bargaining sessions, the printers—International Typographical Union No. 23—agreed to go along with

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“We set up this foundation and then Evjue didn’t want to give any of the money away. Internal Revenue was after us.”

severance pay instead of job security.

“It was in the contract,” he says. “We assumed that it had been settled. They changed this around and you know damn well what the strategy of that was. Who was the guy who was hung in effigy? Who was the guy who appeared on the front page of the *Press Connection* looking like Dracula’s despair? It wasn’t the Lee people. It was me—because the strategy was as Andy Biemiller said: You pick out The Liberal, you go after him and he’s the guy who has got to collapse.”

The MNI strike cast a pall over Mac’s retirement in the spring of 1978. When the family left Buckeye Road for the East, that pall obscured the fact he was one of the finest journalists ever to write a daily column here. Also that he had, early on, positioned the *Capital Times* against the Vietnam War at a time when criticism of that debacle was regarded in some quarters as treason. Also early on, Congressman Bob Kastenmeier was denied the use of the City-County Building for open hearings on the war.

Mac says he isn’t bitter about the strike.

“God,” he exclaims, “life is too short to go around being bitter. I didn’t like some of the stuff that was happening to my family. You know, painting the goddam signs on the house, spray-painting ‘Scab’ and all that goddam kind of business. And I didn’t like the idea of trying to run me off the road at five o’clock in the morning.”

Looking back on it, he recognizes—and he recognized it at the time it was all happening—that if you make a decision to do something “like this,” then you are going to have to pay the price. That’s the way he has always lived his life: *You know, any time you don’t like it, you have the free choice to get the hell out.*

“And what the unions did,” he says, “was what I would have done from the same position. Outside of some of the rhetoric used, the foul-mouth stuff on the picket line and so forth. I oppose that. I wouldn’t want that because that hurts you more than it hurts anybody else. But I didn’t come out with any bitterness. How

can you come out with any bitterness when you win the thing, hands down?"

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It was a bright Indian summer day early in the strike. Midday. There must have been hundreds of people on the picket line. Strikers. Supporters from the community, from the campus. Cars leaving the plant were stacked like planes at O'Hare. Skip Frank of the Journal spotted Mac, a half-dozen cars back, and yelled "Hambone, there's your buddy." We ran to the car. The doors were locked, the windows rolled up. Mac was like a fish in a bowl. He was angry. Hurt. It was all there on his face. The whole strike. I pressed my face against the door-glass and I tried not to be hateful. I tried to be cute. "Mac," I asked him, "how are you going to explain this to The Old Man?"

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"You know," he says, a tanned, crows-footed general critiquing the battle, "the unions could have won that strike if we had been Downtown."

In the Carroll Street days, the plant was as vulnerable as a patient in intensive care, plugged into a life support system that was completely in the hands of others.

"The Teamsters had us by the throat," Mac acknowledges. "We couldn't have gotten newsprint in. We didn't have a warehouse to keep newsprint in. Out at Fish Hatchery, we had a railroad siding.

"We had two warehouses out there and we had them full of newsprint. If we had been Downtown with the office right there in the street, Jesus, there would have been hell to pay, we'd never—"

He stops, leaving unspoken the words *have won that strike*. He thinks a strike would have been successful in 1975. The Guild was all revved up for it, and he thinks it might have happened then, but the Guild made "a big mistake."

"They sent in this guy from Puerto Rico," he recalls, "who advertised himself as the guy who closes down newspapers. He started speaking for the printers. You know, 'Now, the printers want to do this' and the printers would say: 'Who the hell is this spic speaking for us?' They went to hell on that.

"I was never so surprised as when Murph (Martin Wolman, now publisher of the *Wisconsin State Journal*) called me about one o'clock in the morning and

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said: "The printers are signing.' Jesus, I couldn't figure it out. Murph was hanging around the composing room and talking to the printers and pretty soon you found out they were mad as hell about this Guild guy coming in and establishing himself as a spokesman for the printers. He wasn't a bad guy, really."

Mac is insistent that when the printers accepted the contract in 1975, that justified everything that happened to them in 1977. And what happened to them then was Richard Gottlieb, the general manager of MNI.

"I didn't concur in everything Gottlieb did," he says, "but I was not going to be sitting in, second-guessing the guy in charge. Now, obviously, if I was in his position—thank heavens I wasn't—I probably would have done a lot of that differently. You know, there's nothing like hindsight . . .

"The hardest thing in the world to do is what Gottlieb did. I'd hate like hell to have that kind of job. You start cutting people off, cutting their pay—but that's what it was all about.

"What it was all about was that you had people who were supernumeraries. It's happening all over the country."

I thought of all the people in all the unions going down the tubes and as always, Mac read my mind. He just changed a couple of words.

"You know," he began, "the sad thing about it is that a hell of a lot of good newspaper people went down the chute on it. Nobody ever wins one of these damn things. I've always felt that way about it. A strike is like a war, you know. It's when rationality breaks down."

Cutting costs is one way newspapers cope with what Mac calls "the malaise" in the print media: the decline and death of newspapers, particularly afternoon papers.

"Fortunately," he admits, "in MNI, we've got a situation here where it's divided up. Especially for the *Capital Times* or the *Times* would have been out of business long ago."

The "malaise," he feels, is caused mostly by the rise of electronic journalism. As a lifelong newspaper man, unlike some, he is impressed by the tube.

"For news," he enthuses, "there's nothing that beats that television set right in your front room. You don't have to depend on some guy to screen the thing for you. You see what happens. They're covering wars like this now."

Reading and writing, in the traditional sense, are probably becoming lost arts, he concedes, but he doesn't mourn their passing.

"My God," he says, "our oldest son never learned how to write until he went away to school and he had to write home for money."

Kids today, he's noticed, use words—and use them correctly—that *they don't recognize when they see them in print*. It's a shock to discover that, he says, but it doesn't alarm him for the future.

"Jean Lucey," he recalls, "she got so damn mad at me one night she was about to throw me out of the Executive Mansion because I said: '*What difference does it make? You don't have to learn to read in an electronic age like this.*' The point is whether you can *communicate*. And these kids can communicate."

He says that to be alarmed about the rise of electronic media is akin to being alarmed about the sun coming up in the morning. It's inevitable. He doesn't agree with the doomsayers that the decline of print media portends the decline of citizenship which means the decline of the country.

"That's a lot of crap," he snaps. "You know that. You don't *have* to have print journalism. You can put those cassettes in and listen. You can even be diddling around with something else while you're listening. *You don't have to read.*"

Our kids have already mastered all this stuff. They have all the contraptions, shortwaves, cassettes. They see me reading the *New York Times* and they say: '*Jesus, the Old Guy there, reading . . .*'"

He doesn't countenance the criticism that all TV news people are just blow-dried, pretty talking heads, without the credentials of the Old Professionals.

"What the hell credentials did Aldric Revell have?" he asks. "Or Ced Parker? Parker's credentials were that he was a good second-story man. He'd break into safes and get stories that Evjue wanted. Most of the old newspaper reporters never finished their education."

He cites his son's experience as a broadcasting major at the University of Arkansas.

You have to be conscious all the time of what that picture is. Time. Every second counts. You don't fool around. You gotta say it. Say what it is and get it over with. Man, it has made a difference in him. The discipline that you have there is something you never had in the news-

paper business.

"You're not gonna have guys," he said of the electronic future, "sitting, like we all did, just able to hit those keys and get the damn thing out for Western Union. You can't do that operating on television. Radio, to some degree, you can, but you're not gonna have a bunch of drunks gathering the news. More is the pity."

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James Roy Miller, a Capital Times photographer who wore straw skimmers and wingtip shoes in season, was dried-out by the time I met him. "I don't know if the Times made drunks out of people," he philosophized at Hill's Coffee Shop, "or the drunks made a paper out of the Times." Evjue kept him on the payroll all the times he dried out. In his own drinking days, before he became a teetotaler, Evjue was once picked up for drunk and disorderly, and had the story put on the Times front page. "Evjue had a soft spot for drunks," James Roy said. "He used to be one of us."

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"We set up the Foundation," Mac said, "and then Evjue didn't want to give any of the money away. Internal Revenue was after us. Jesus, I'd fight with him. So I went to see the former judge, Jackman, a hell of a smart lawyer who was on the Rennebohm Foundation Board. I was having so much trouble with Evjue, I thought maybe I'd get some help from this guy who had so much experience and he said: 'Don't tell me. We've got the same thing with Oscar. He doesn't want to give any of the money out either.' Of course, in Evjue's time, we never had the income we have now. We're giving out a hell of a lot of money around here now. I'm sure if Evjue knew about it, it would haunt him. Jesus, he hated to spend money. Wow."

Like an actor assuming a familiar role, Mac screwed up his face and there was William T. Evjue, a cross between Carl Sandburg and Barney Rubble, and when Mac spoke, there was The Old Man's voice:

"Goddam, McMillin. You'll spend us into bankruptcy."

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If he was running the *Capital Times*, Mac allows that he'd be "blasting" a lot harder than they are. He also allows that maybe the circulation would be dropping

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faster, too.

"People don't like to be told unpleasant things," he says. If he was still writing the daily editorials, the daily *Hello, Wisconsin* on the front page, he'd be telling people unpleasant things:

- *Menachim Begin*, he snorts. He comes over here to beg for more war materials, then he goes back and sells it to the fascists in Argentina and the fanatics in Iran. *Merchants of Death*. The new *Merchants of Death* are in the land of the *Prince of Peace*. Jesus, what chance is there?

- *The Moral Majority*, he continues, *Impossible to believe it could happen in this country. You're going right back to the Ayatollah Khomeini kind of Old Testament religion and the whole approach of these people—and this is one of the things I don't think the Capital Times is doing enough about—the approach of these people, these fundamentalists, is that the human being is essentially evil.*

Their whole damn approach to politics is based on that: Unless you accept Jesus, you can't get into Heaven. Unless you accept these Old Testament principles of how to conduct your life, you are deserving of nothing but banishment.

And you know, this flies in the face of the whole human experience. Mankind has made great progress and that testifies to the essential good there is in people. There is no human slavery left in the world. Child labor is gone in this country — although this Administration is trying to bring it back. The story of the progress, the advance of humanity is so easy to see that it's impossible to believe that this god-dam crowd could come in and find this kind of acceptance, have access to the White House and have the luminaries of Congress belonging to their damn movement. It just makes you shake.

We have another cowboy in the White House, he says without smiling, another macho type. This is the thing that bothers me. The longer I live, the more I come to the conclusion that there's only one important issue and that's survival. And in the Nuclear Age, you gotta be careful of the macho types.

That's what I liked about Jimmy Carter. He was not a macho type. I was never so surprised in all my life as when he sent that ill-fated expedition into Iran to free the hostages. That was so unlike him.

Dwight Eisenhower was another one who never got carried away with all this damn macho stuff. Unlike Lyndon Johnson and Jack Kennedy. Jesus, Jack Kennedy. If Khrushchev hadn't had sense enough to back off at the time of the Cuban crisis, this world would be a cinder now.

Kennedy was gonna go for the Big Casino over that little piece of rock down there and then he admitted in a press conference in November of that year [1962] that the whole thing didn't really involve our security at all, because the Russian submarines are closer to our shores with missiles than the Cuban missiles were. But, Jesus, Kennedy and Nelson Rockefeller were running around, telling us to dig holes in the ground, hide in there, shoot your neighbor if he wants to get in there with you . . .

He goes to the Mayo Clinic regularly for treatment of his cancer—in a letter last Christmas time, he called it *My Herculean struggle with Glen Gray and His Carcinoma Band* and he has a bad leg now because of the radiation, he thinks. That left him nerve damage and he was in a wheelchair last December and January. He used a cane until June. It forced him to give up his beloved tennis.

"I ride a bicycle about ten miles a day," he says, "but that's not a workout. So the suet piles up, and the gut, and you don't feel good. You feel tired. Tennis, God. That sets you up for the day."

When you get the verdict, Mac says without a trace of self-pity, that *THAT* wart is there and *WORKING*, you do some very serious thinking about life and whether you're gonna stick around. I have a friend who's busting out with these damn things all over and he's running around, doing all these dramatic things—all that stuff he's missed, he's gonna catch up on it now. He'll screw himself to death before the cancer takes him. He took a cottage up north and only stayed a week. 'I couldn't stand it up there,' he says, so he's back and carrying on about how it's all over and the suffering. I tell him: You don't have to go through the suffering. You know, there's a lot of quick ways out of this damn business. I said I've got mine all established and he said: 'Oh, God, I couldn't do that to my little grandson.' I said: 'Jesus Christ, what's the use of talking to you?'

Mac goes up to Rochester once every three months and he says the Mayo Clinic has been a tremendous experience.

"I'll tell you," he urges, "everybody, before he dies, ought to go up there and take a look at it. At least, see their museum."

When I asked him if he missed Madison, Mac's answer was: "God, who doesn't miss Madison?" He said when you get "outside," you realize how different Madison is, how different Dane County is.

"Why is it such a strong bastion of the Democratic Party?" he asked. "Why is Bob Kastenmeier able to hang on here? You know, Bob Kastenmeier is one of the phenomena of modern politics. Gaylord Nelson falls and everybody else falls and there's Kastenmeier standing there, quiet and tough. Tough as hell. Never yields on any of his positions, and God knows, the *State Journal* for years, they've been tearing out their hair about this guy. And he keeps going back in. And I think the *Capital Times* has something to do with that, something to do with the political ambience in Dane County."

Damn right, he said. *Madison tugs at you all the time. It's just the greatest community in the world. You can't find a better place to live. It's sort of an island here—and it's beautiful.*

The Old Man, himself, never said it better. ■

