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HONORS JOURNALISM: SELECTED WRITINGS

THE HONORS COLLEGE – STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT
ALBANY

BY MATTHEW JOSEPH BOUTIN

MAY 9, 2011

Contained in this writing package are the seven best-crafted and most compelling pieces of writing of my undergraduate career. They have been assembled, expanded and edited under the supervision of my project advisor, Professor Thomas Bass, into this final product. One of the benefits of majoring in Journalism I most appreciate is having the freedom to constantly explore new topics in my writing. This collection reflects the broad scope of the major, as it includes articles covering a diverse range of issues and events, as well as a media study and an autobiographical story. The composition of each of the following works was a miniature intellectual journey for me. I hope that they are as informative and stimulating for those reading them as they were for me to write them.

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Cash-Strapped: City Arts Organizations Join National Battle for Dwindling Funds

November 9, 2010

The “Music Mobile” is probably the most famous vehicle in the city of Albany.

A collage of bright yellow, green, blue and children’s drawings, the battered 14-year-old Dodge Ram cargo van announces its presence on city streets by blaring folk music from the twin set of loudspeakers mounted on its hood. The music, recognized by thousands, typically brings scores of singing kids rushing out to the sidewalks in anticipation of seeing the van. Just as recognizable to the children is the vehicle’s driver, Ruth Pelham.

Pelham and her colorful van are the heart and soul of one of Albany’s most cherished art organizations, Music Mobile Inc. An avid songwriter, singer, educator, and unabashed product of the 1970s, she writes all her own music and is able to recite the lyrics from heart at a moment’s notice. Pelham has also authored several books to accompany her recorded music.

The aspiring community activist pitched the idea for her traveling music workshop to the Albany city government in 1977. Her goal was to bring the gift of music to the city’s poorest residents in the form of free instruction and concerts, and “use the power of music to build, empower, and heal communities.”

Albany approved her proposal and supplied her with the original Music Mobile van and the needed start-up funds. Over three decades later, the Music Mobile program has served tens of thousands of Albany’s most underprivileged children and branched out from music and arts programming into social services under Pelham’s guidance.

Each week Pelham pilots her van to parks, schools, and community centers around the city where she conducts different activities for the cities children. Some days she leads them in sing-a-longs, others showing them how to make tambourines, and most of the time teaches them songs about staying in school, picking up litter, and showing love to one another.

As of 2010, three different generations of Albany residents have now partaken in Music Mobile programming. As the Executive Director of the Music Mobile since its inception, Pelham has become a local celebrity for her work with Albany’s children.

Stopping into a CVS pharmacy on Central Avenue in the summer of 2010 to make a purchase, Pelham was immediately recognized by the cash register clerk as the Director of the Music Mobile, a program he had attended as a child. He began singing one of the songs she had taught him-and was quickly joined by customers throughout the store who remembered the same lyrics from their childhood with her.

To help tackle the ever increasing scope of her programming Pelham now rents office space on Central Avenue and employs as many as eight full-time workers in the summer. She relies on interns to complete the remaining work that she can't take care of herself or afford additional employees to do.

Now, at what is arguably the peak of its popularity, Music Mobil Inc. is going to have some of the gas taken out of its engine this coming fiscal year.

Like dozens of other arts programs in Albany, Pelham's brainchild is about to lose an important grant awarded annually by the city government. For 25 years Albany has annually divided \$350,000 amongst arts organizations in the city, an allotment which Mayor Gerald Jennings has proposed to eliminate from the 2011 city budget.

This cut is just one of many in a budget which also raises property taxes 7.5% and fires 155 city employees in order to close a looming \$23 million budget deficit.

Historically, the arts in Albany have enjoyed strong support in City Hall. Mayor Jennings and a number of Common Council members have long advocated for public art as a means of improving the standard of living in the city.

Jennings' administration has also tried to use the arts, such as the summertime "Alive at Five" concert series held in the Corning Preserve riverfront park, to draw visitors and businesses within the city boundaries as a means of raising revenue through sales taxes.

"These organizations are vital to our city's overall cultural and economic vibrancy and I am very pleased that in collaboration with the Albany Local Development Corporation, we are able to continue our financial commitment to them," Mayor Jennings said about the 32 grant recipients in a 2010 interview with the *Albany Times-Union*.

Until this coming year grant recipients have been determined by the city Arts Commission and dispensed through the Albany Local Development Corporation. For the 2010 fiscal year, the grant money was divided between 32 different organizations.

The largest five shares went to the Capital Repertory Theatre with \$60,000, Park Playhouse and Palace Theatre with \$55,000 apiece, the Albany Institute of History of Art with \$53,000 and the Albany Symphony Orchestra with \$39,000.

The remaining \$88,000 was divided between 27 other organizations, many of which, despite their smaller budgets and grants, are just as well known and established as their larger counterparts.

The 18th century South End mansion known as Historic Cherry Hill, which is in the process of having its infrastructure restored, received a \$1,000 grant. The downtown Albany Civic Theatre, which is known for its youth theatre training program and year-round performances, received a \$7,000 grant. Pelham's Music Mobile Inc. received a grant for \$8,000.

In order to be eligible for the funding, the applicants need to be non-profit organizations, willing to donate a service to both the city of Albany and one of its public schools, and able to submit a written report of the group's activities at the end of the fiscal year.

Despite its generous track record with the arts, the Mayor's office insists it cannot provide the funding this coming year. Jennings' budget also completely eliminated funding for summer work programs, closed the South End public baths and the St. Vincent's Community Center, and chopped funds for long-standing city events like Tulip Fest by half.

The Budget Director for the Mayor's Office, Christopher Hearley, has insisted that the proposed cuts are all necessary, and their widespread nature was proof that the Mayor did not single out the arts for elimination.

"We looked at the entire budget and, with the goal of keeping the tax increase as low as possible, we had to prioritize our spending. Public safety is our number one priority," said Hearley, noting that the ongoing economic recession has hit city and town budgets across the country.

For the 2011 fiscal year \$50 million has been earmarked for the Police Department and \$30 million for the Fire Department according to Hearley. These sums, which constitute half of the proposed \$159.9 million budget, will still leave those two departments understaffed.

Arts leaders have not expressed any anger about the loss of their grants- instead most express an understanding of the city's financial woes and gratitude for the assistance it has lent them in the past. Pelham hasn't detected anything adversarial between the city and its arts community as a result of the difficult cuts, and describes a "mutual affection" between the two groups.

"We've always had a very supportive relationship with the city of Albany," she said. They [in city government] realize the impact arts programs have on the standard of living in the city.

The Music Mobile Inc. got its start in 1977 with city and Federal assistance. Pelham credits the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a Federal jobs program started in 1973 and administered locally by the city of Albany, as giving her the initial resources to begin her program.

The Music Mobil continued to grow with the assistance of staff and funds from the city Recreation Department and Albany Community Development Agency block grants. The city even supplied Pelham with the original Music Mobile's original Dodge van.

State and county grants, donations from individuals and businesses also began flowing to the program. Later, the \$8,000 annual arts became an important component of the Music Mobile's current \$140,000 annual budget.

"Direct support from the city has been crucial and immensely appreciated," confirms Pelham.

A larger and equally appreciative recipient of arts money has been The Albany Institute of History and Art.

They've [the city of Albany] been fantastic to us in the past says Steve Ricci, Director of Public Relations and Marketing for the Institute.

"It's hard to point fingers at the city because of these cuts. They have to make some hard choices," acknowledges Ricci. "But it's also important to recognize the value of the arts. They make the city what it is."

The Institute, which is located on Washington Avenue overlooking the Arbor Hill and North End neighborhoods of the city, is, unbeknownst to many in the city, the second oldest museum in the United States.

“It was founded in 1791-when George Washington was still President,” explained Ricci. “The museum is an incredible part of Albany’s history.”

The Institute has the stated goal of preserving the art and history of the Upper Hudson and Albany region. Its exhibits include displays of 19th century American sculptures, paintings by the renowned Hudson River School of art, and colonial era artifacts.

Ironically, given the Museum’s emphasis on Upstate New York, the best-known exhibit may be the Ancient Egypt Gallery. This includes a display of two human mummies, and one of a dog, imported from Egypt in 1958. The “Albany mummies,” as they have become known, are a favorite display for student visitors according to Ricci.

The museum is staffed with 18 full time employees and a variable number of additional part time workers. Operations and staff are maintained with an annual operating budget of \$2 million.

The \$53,000 grant provided by the city constitutes less than 3% of the overall museum budget, but is nonetheless a crucial piece of a fragile budget held together by twelve different grants according to Ricci.

“In this current economic climate every penny counts because it’s very hard to raise money. That \$53,000, that’s the equivalent of the salary of one of our employees,” he said

“This lose was tough to take. We count on this money every year.”

The Institute is not acting prematurely on the assumption that the funds are lost, but is holding out hope that the cuts may be reversed before the budget becomes law according to Ricci.

However, Albany’s “strong-mayor” form of government makes it unlikely that the Mayor’s budget will be altered. The city legislature, or Common Council, can vote on the budget, but a two-thirds majority is needed to make any changes. If no changes are made by the Common Council the budget automatically goes into effect on November 30.

Councilman Calsolaro, who represents the First Ward located in the South End of Albany, and Councilwoman Leah Golby of the midtown-based Tenth Ward, don't see much chance of the arts grants being restored by the Common Council. In fact, neither Council member would themselves vote to replace the grant allotment into the budget.

Calsolaro, who has been at odds with the Mayor during past budget debates, agrees with Jennings' decision to eliminate the arts funding. The Councilman is quick to point out that, in addition to having become an unaffordable luxury, the grants no longer serve their intended purpose.

"These grants weren't set up to be permanent. They were just supposed to be start up money until these organizations could find other sustaining sources of revenue, but they came to depend on them," said Calsolaro.

Calsolaro, who serves of the Advisory Board of the grant recipient Historic Cherry Hill, said he takes no pleasure in cutting the funding so abruptly.

"I hate to see them [the grants] go like this. I wish we had been able to wean the programs off the grant money gradually."

Like Calsolaro, Golby has a background in the city arts scene. She spent years as a grant application writing for the Albany Symphony Orchestra, where she saw firsthand the tight budgets that many art organizations are forced to operate on

"When the Symphony was on a really tight operating budget and we needed money, I used to have the call the Development Corporation daily to get updates as to when the grant money would be released," said Golby.

Despite her acknowledgement that arts organizations are typically "severely underfunded." Golby insisted that the city needed to prioritize and focus spending.

"Art grants are not strategic. We need to concentrate on basic services, keeping the streets clean, and policing the streets in order to draw people and businesses back to Albany. Then maybe we could afford money for arts again," said Golby.

While direct funding is out of the question in her mind, the Councilwoman does feel the city can assist the arts organizations to leverage money through other sources. For example, she feels the Music Mobile, which she describes as “very important programming”, should be eligible for social service money in addition to arts funds.

Should the final version of the Albany 2011 budget pass without the restoration of the grants as Calsolaro and Golby anticipate, the former recipients will join scores of other arts organizations across the nation that have suffered cuts at the hands of deficit-swamped state and local governments hit hard by the economic recession.

In Dallas, Texas the proposed 2011 budget slashes funding for its Office of Cultural Affairs by 55%, a cut which comes on the heels of a 34% reduction in 2009. The 50,000 cultural and arts events funded fully or partially by the Office of Cultural Affairs attracted 5.5 million people in 2009 according to *D Magazine*, a Dallas based lifestyle publication.

The Nevada Arts Council saw its funding chopped from \$2.8 million in 2008 to \$1.3 million in 2010. Plans for more cuts are being proposed in the state legislature according to *The Nevada Sagebush*, a Reno based newspaper.

The largest statewide reduction in art funding in the United States occurred in Michigan in 2009, when \$5 million of its \$7 million allotment for arts funding, or 80% was eliminated. This made Michigan the largest defunder of the arts in the United States, followed by Florida with 65% and Illinois with 53% according to Michigan Public Radio.

The Albany arts organizations will have to compete with these art organizations, and scores of others like them across the country, for remaining funding.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is an independent agency created by the federal government in 1965 to support and promote the arts in the United States. It is the largest funder of arts in the country, having doled out \$128,000 grants totaling over \$4 billion since its creation.

Despite the NEA’s substantial resources, statistics and records kept by the agency show it has less to offer needy arts organizations during this recession than in past decades. The NEA’s budget was chopped by nearly half in the 1990s, going from a high of \$176 million in 1993 to \$98 million in 2000, a reduction it has yet to fully recover from.

At the same time, the number of applicants for NEA grants has risen steadily. 2,599 grant requests were submitted in 2000. By 2008 the number of grant applicants had leapt to 4,803.

In 2010 there were 5,691 grant applications, an increase of 888 from just two years earlier and over twice the total number submitted in 2000. The increases in funding the NEA has received over that time period have not kept pace with the number of new of applicants according to Jamie Bennet, the Director of Public Affairs for the NEA.

The New York Council for the Humanities is facing similar pressure. Founded in 1975 to support the humanities in New York with grants and cultural programming, the Foundation' has given millions of dollars to non-profit organizations across the state.

In 2007 the Foundation provided nearly \$445,000 to cultural, artistic, and historic projects across the state, including a \$2,500 education grant and the services of two historians of Hudson Valley history to the Albany Institute of History and Art and a \$2,500 gift to the State University of New York at Albany.

In 2010 the Foundation channeled 485,000 into programs across the state, including another \$2,190 grant for the Albany Institute of History and Art and \$2,250 for Historic Cherry Hill. However, Council officials fear its currently healthy cash flow, which increased \$40,000 between 2007 and 2010, can't remain so strong much longer.

Executive Director Sara Ogger notes that because the Council is predominantly funded by federal and state resources, it is susceptible to the same cuts that have stricken organizations in Albany and across the country. Her and her colleagues are anticipating that such cuts will soon extend to the Council as well.

“All of our programs are going to come under pressure from increased applicants and decreased funding,” said Ogger.

“We are bracing for the worst and we are probably going to have to make some cuts.”

Like the NEA, the Foundation has already seen its funds stretched thin by a marked increase in the number of grant applicants it has received, an increase Ogger attributes directly to the

evaporation of alternate sources of funding across the country driving larger numbers of art organizations to fewer sources of funding.

With increased competition for smaller amounts of money, area organizations will have to get creative with their fundraising efforts if they hope to remain financially solvent.

The leaders of the Albany Institute of History and Art are already trying to identify new possible corporate donors as a result of their inability to persuade private donors to contribute greater sums during the current economic recession according to Ricci.

To help replace the impending loss of the Music Mobile's \$8,000 grant and her ailing van, Pelham is also brainstorming new sources of revenue, mindful that new grant money is not likely to be easily forthcoming.

So far she has come up with a fundraiser called "Running On Your Empties," effectively a city-wide bottle drive targeting local businesses and colleges which produce large numbers of refundable beverage containers. The fundraiser is in its early stages, and Pelham anticipates it will be at least another month before it goes into operation.

Regardless of how the bottle fundraising goes, Pelham has no plans to put the Music Mobile on blocks anytime soon.

"I am worried that this cut to our funding could cause a decrease in our programming, she said.

"But we are not going to be stopped"

SUNY Holiday Criteria Misunderstood by Many Students

September 22, 2010

This fall semester the State University of New York at Albany suspended classes from September 8-10, a hiatus which left most students happy with the free time and many clueless as to the occasion.

‘Some sorta Jewish holidays I think- not sure which one. I just know I enjoy the days off’ responded senior Joseph Stepansky when asked why classes were cancelled.

‘‘We get the days off for Rosh Hashanah,’’ elaborated senior Trisha Tolentino when faced with the same inquiry.

Like many students, Stepansky and Tolentino misidentify the suspended classes as University recognition of the Jewish holiday. Across the student body a similar misperception exists that the roughly five-week ‘‘Winter Break’’ in December and January is in celebration of the Christian holiday of Christmas and the weeklong ‘‘Spring Break’’ in April is for Christian Easter and Jewish Passover.

This misperception has led to charges against the University of granting preferred status toward Christian and Jewish holidays and shafting Muslim ones. SUNY at Albany has suspended classes during a Muslim holiday only once - during Eid al-Fitr in 2005.

In actuality, State University of New York (SUNY) policy towards religious holidays is driven by pragmatism and affords students of all religions the ability to celebrate holy occasions important to them.

SUNY at Albany, like all other SUNY schools, is officially forbidden by state law from commemorating religious holidays according to Media Relations Director Karl Luntta. Commemoration would include declaring a University-wide holiday for one of a particular religion, a violation of the constitutional separation of Church and state.

SUNY schools are permitted to suspend classes in anticipation of high levels of absenteeism or in recognition of state or national holidays, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Prominent religious holidays typically result in high levels of absenteeism, so classes are often cancelled

around those days. The fall 2010 cancellation of classes during Rosh Hashanah is a prime example of this.

Holiday scheduling is handled by the University Senate, a legislative body composed of school faculty and staff. Student concerns and the make-up of the University are taken into consideration when crafting the academic calendar.

“There is a lot of debate and discussion that goes into these decisions,” Luntta said.

State law allows for individual students to request off their most sacred religious occasions without repercussions. The procedures for this are detailed in the New York Education Law, section 244-A, which mandates that teachers and administrators cooperate with students to reschedule tests and exempt them from class on such dates.

But this accommodation is deemed insufficient by some Muslims and non-Muslims alike who see suspension of classes as proper treatment for such occasions.

“I believe the current calendar isn't that fair” argues Amira Alkhatib, spokesperson for the University’s Muslim Student Association (MSA).

“If Christianity and Judaism are represented, why not complete the monotheistic trend and add Islamic holidays? After all, of all three, Islam is the most widely practiced religion in the world.”

Shannon Cohen, a junior and devout Jew, agrees with Alkhatib that the calendar isn’t reasonable and that the University should suspend classes during some Muslim holidays.

Cohen points out that few Jews are devout in their observance of holidays like Rosh Hashanah, and simply see the days-off as an opportunity to relax. Through personal experience she has found that putting section 244-A to use is difficult and believes it to be a poor substitute for a university-wide holiday.

Typically Muslim holidays fall far short of creating the conditions that demand a suspension of classes.

Absenteeism is considered high enough to cancel classes “if it is enough to disrupt the normal flow of academic life,” explains Luntta. He also notes that this determination “is not an exact science” because the University does not collect religious data on students. However, all available evidence suggests that there are vastly more Christian and Jewish students than Muslim attending SUNY at Albany.

Christians certainly compose a solid majority of the student body, as they do across the nation as a whole. Jewish students compose a substantial minority. In fact, SUNY at Albany is located in the most heavily Jewish state and likely has one of the largest Jewish enrollments of any university in the nation. The school also employs a large number of Jewish professors who might request time off as result of religious holidays

Of the school’s 13,100 undergraduates, 3,500 (26%) are estimated to be Jewish according to UAlbany Hillel, a prominent Jewish organization on campus. Hillel also claims that 1,500 (30%) of the school’s 4,900 graduate students are Jewish. Even if this figures are overestimates, the Jewish student body is considerable, enough so for its absence to be deemed disruptive to the normal operation of the school.

In sharp contrast, Muslims constitute a tiny portion of the student body. Ashraf Khater, Secretary of the MSA, estimates the number of practicing Muslims enrolled in the low hundreds, and a number more who are non-practicing. Thus, the absenteeism created by this small population has repeatedly been deemed non-disruptive to school operations.

At the SUNY College at Geneseo, Jewish students find themselves in the same position as Muslims do at SUNY at Albany because they constitute such a small percentage of the student body. Of SUNY at Geneseo’s 4,950 undergraduate students, about 300 (6%) are Jewish according to Geneseo Associate Dean Kerry McKeever. As a result, classes are not suspended during Jewish holidays.

“Were we to honor all religious holidays, we would fall into a morass of absenteeism and the difficulties that attend this” McKeever said in support of the Geneseo policy.

McKeever feels that the 244-A section of the Education Law is an appropriate option for students who need to miss school in observance of a holiday.

“Our policy is that we honor the individual requests of all students of all denominations” said McKeever.

“Basically, then, we believe that each faith has one or two holy days that are considered absolutely sacred, and we endeavor to attend to the needs of the students on that basis. Students, and staff, and faculty need to be reasonable in this negotiation, and we all try to be.”

This option is even more sensible for Muslim students when the practical difficulties of scheduling Islamic holidays are taken into account. Religious dates on the Christian, or Gregorian, calendar remain very constant over time. Christmas, for example, always falls on December 25. Both the Jewish and Muslim religions operate on lunisolar calendars, which cause the dates of religious holidays to shift from year to year.

What makes Jewish holidays more practical to schedule is that they shift less dramatically than Muslim ones according to Rabbi Mendel, Director of the Shabbos House Rohr Chabad Jewish Student Center. He notes that Rosh Hashanah changes dates yearly but almost always falls in September.

Eid al-Adha, a holiday many Muslim students would prefer to have off, will fluctuate between September, October, and November over the coming five academic years. Furthermore, the Muslim Sunni and Shia sects use slightly different calendars, which can cause divergence in the holidays of the two groups and would further complicate the academic calendar

Khater doesn't find the current academic calendar to be unfair to Muslims when considering their small population and the difficulty of accommodating Islamic holidays. He has invoked section 244-A with success in the past and found teachers and faculty accommodating to his religious needs.

He still hopes that as the Muslim community grows on campus they will eventually gain enough clout, like the Jewish religious minority, to have class suspensions scheduled over Islamic holidays.

The MSA isn't waiting long for that time to come. Undeterred by the impracticality of suspending classes during Muslim holiday, the group plans to push the University Senate to suspend classes for Eid al-Adha in 2011. Khater is confident the proposal will make headway.

“More days off from school would be great, right?” he asked with a laugh.

“Golden Age” of Capital Region Car Racing Wanes

December 6, 2010

It was the last turn of the last lap.

Driver Clem Da Biere gripped the steering wheel of race car 312 as he sped towards the finish line.

Da Biere was dead last – fourth in a race of four cars. It was his first time racing on an oval track, and his poor placing wasn't bothering him a bit. In fact, he was having the time of his life.

Bob Novak, the owner of the car stood in the race track pits. Novak was proud to see his car zooming around the track. He was watching years of dreams and work come to fruition.

Then, with seconds to go before crossing the finish line, the right back wheel fell off. The bolts holding it to the axel had completely sheared off.

A week earlier, one of Novak's fellow high school students had introduced him to his 24-year-old brother, Clem, in the parking lot of Amsterdam High. Novak was only 16 - too young to drive - but already owned his own race car. Word had gotten around that he needed a driver.

“This guy by the name of Bobbie Novak comes over and says- I got a stock car. You wanna drive it?” recalls Da Biere. The two life-long Amsterdam residents quickly brokered a deal to have Da Biere, already an accomplished drag racer, get behind the wheel of Novak's car and try his luck at stock car racing.

“Everything was new to us. We didn't know about side bite or wedge or stagger.” explains Da Biere, referring to some basic principles of oval racing.

“All Bob knew was that I used to blister the highways drag racing.”

Novak laughs in agreement. “We didn't know anything. But we knew we wanted to race.”

A week after agreeing to join forces at the high school, May 8, 1965, they attached Novak's stockcar to Da Biere's 1964 Dodge Rambler and left for Lebanon Valley Speedway, 60 miles to the east across the Hudson River.

The entered in a “Special Class” race designated for amateur racers. They would face off against just three other drivers, including two rising stars in the local racing scene equipped with better cars and more experience, Thomas Corellis and Al “King” Kessler.

“We were really outclassed,” acknowledges Novak.

But with only three wheels on the car Da Biere handled himself like a pro, piloting his injured vehicle through the finish line behind the others.

Their winnings for the night were \$8, handed to them in an envelope by future Lebanon Valley Speedway owner Howard Commander along with an invitation to return and race again.

Novak and Da Biere where thrilled – they had gotten the opportunity to participate in one of the Capital Regions biggest spectator sport at the peak of its popularity.

The 1950s and 1960s were a “Golden Age” for stockcar racing the in the United States northeast, an era of unprecedented - and since unrivaled - fan interest and local participation.

Howard Commander, who took over and retains the family business of Lebanon Valley Speedway, notes that the popularity of racing was fueled in part by the absence of modern forms of entertainment.

Television sets, which many families still didn’t own in the 1950s, lacked color and typically offered only three channels. Video games didn’t exist, and malls such as Colonie Center were only just being built.

However, the races were a powerful draw in their own right. The growing popularity of the sport spawned the opening of Empire Raceways in Menands in 1947, south Troy’s Pine Bowl Speedway in 1948, Lebanon Valley Speedway in 1953, Albany’s Victoria Speedway in 1960, and Malta’s Albany-Saratoga Speedway in 1965.

The area’s best-known track was in the otherwise sleepy town of Fonda, New York. Fonda Speedway is the self-described “Track of Champions,” a name which it earned the rights to in 1955, when Fonda racer Pete Corey won the “Race of Champions” at Langehorn Speedway in Pennsylvania - the biggest of his roughly 250 feature victories.

Numerous smaller tracks, their names since forgotten by all but those who frequented them, were carved out of farmer's fields and woods around the Capital Region.

Races in the 1950s and following two decades rarely failed to draw a crowd, and Fonda Speedway was even more packed than rival tracks. Often filling to the point of standing room only, fans lined up at the gates four hours before a race even began.

They crowds were full of energy and always anxious for the race to start, often watching for race cars to arrive on trailers from the south side of the Mohawk River over a bridge adjacent to the track.

“When the race cars were towed across the bridge to Fonda, the crowd would boo or cheer depending on how they felt about their drivers. That's how eager people were for the races,” recalls Novak.

When the races began, crowds roared with approval as the cars sent clouds of dust into the air and barreled around the dirt track. The excitement didn't stop until late in the night.

The stars of the races were the drivers, and no one captured the essence of these local celebrities better than photographer John Grady.

He served as the official track photographer at Albany-Saratoga Speedway from 1965 to 1975, and captured snapshots at other tracks across the Northeast, eventually amassing thousands of photographs.

There were wealthy drivers who could afford top-notch cars, but for the most part they were men of modest means who built their cars on the cheap, rounding up parts from junk yards and garages. Their cars lacked the modern convenience of power steering, and shoddy brakes were common.

Grady's pictures reveal the drivers often as gruff, unpolished, solid men. More often than not they are pictured puffing on a cigarette or cigar- even while accepting a trophy.

They raced their cars in the same clothes and blue jumpsuits they worked in – and sometimes died that way.

Safety features in the often homemade stockcars were few and often neglected. While exact records weren't kept, Novak says injuries were far more in those decades than in the present.

Many cars contained only lap seatbelts which allowed the driver to be jolted forward and hit their face on the steering wheel in a collision. Many lost teeth as a result.

Sometimes the seatbelts were so ineffective that many drivers didn't bother to use them at all. Grady recalls a popular saying about seatbelts amongst the drivers.

“Wear ‘em lose so you can kiss your ass goodbye.”

In worse accidents it was not rare for drivers to lose limbs. Pete Corey lost his leg in a crash at Fonda in 1959. Trying to make the most out of his injury, Corey installed a transistor radio and a compartment for a pistol into his prosthetic leg and continued to race, continuing his winning ways for decades with the help of a specially installed hand brake in his cars.

For some drivers, racing would be last thing they ever did. Death at area race tracks was not rare. Inadequate leather helmets, nicknamed “widow makers,” often failed to prevent head injuries which often proved fatal.

In 1955, high-profile racer Otis Eaton died in a wreck at Fonda, and 1965 saw the deaths of Louis Smith and Pepper Eastman. Other, lesser known drivers perished as well.

Even fans weren't immune from danger. One week after Eaton's death a tire flew off a car at Fonda, striking and killing a bystander leaning over a fence to see the race.

“In the early 70s it seemed like guys were getting taken out of Fonda in an ambulance every week,” says Novak.

“No one thought about this stuff with safety. It's something you loved so much you were willing to risk your neck.”

Howard Commander, the owner and operator of Lebanon Valley Speedway says he understands why drivers were, and continue to be, willing to take the risks of racing.

“The desire to race is as addicting as any other activity. The rush one gets from racing other cars is phenomenal. It's better than drugs. Not that I've done drugs,” says Commander.

Drivers like Pete Corey became local heroes for their daring and skill, inspiring young men like Da Biere and Novak to watch and strive to participate in racing.

Novak chose for himself an unorthodox racing model - a surly Vermonter by the name of "Black Jack" Dubrul. Dubrul never placed well in his less than two years of racing, but impressed Novak with his underdog status, black car, black attire, and his arrival at the track in a Corvette bearing girls from the nightclub he owned in Burlington

It wasn't until July of 1961 that Novak saw his first race when his older sister Barbara and her boyfriend Joseph took him to Fonda Speedway. He still recalls the crowds and zooming cars vividly to this day.

Novak's other passion, baseball, was quickly forgotten. In 1962 he went to Fonda Speedway every week of the racing season.

"I just feel in love with it. I knew right then I wanted to drive a race car," says Novak.

Achieving that goal would be no small feat.

Novak worked as a paper boy, hawking copies of the Amsterdam Evening Recorder to each of his 60 customers for 50 cents a week. After giving the newspaper its cut of the money, Novak's profit margin was rarely more than \$10 a week. Still he managed to save.

In March of 1965 Novak learned from a classmate that a local shop owner had a stockcar for sale. He jumped at the opportunity, paying \$40 for his first set of wheels.

His purchase was a 1953 Chevy. It had already raced at Victoria Speedway and was ready to run again. However, Novak wanted to make some slight alterations.

Using a brush he painted the car jet black with Rustoleum paint - homage to Dubrul's color of choice - making it the first of many black cars he would own. It was ready for its May 8 race at Lebanon Valley.

Novak himself didn't pilot a race car around an oval track until 1972, when he took part in warm-ups at Albany-Saratoga Speedway. He drove at Fonda in 1973 and, after a hiatus, made his

best finish- eight out of 56 cars in a 100 lap race- at Lebanon Valley in 1988. He ran a couple different cars, and his girlfriend Jeanne Wilson helped build and maintain them.

His last race was in 1991, when he got behind the wheel of a pink 1970 Chevy Chevelle adorned with the names of rock groups Megadeth and Slayer owned by his younger racing partners.

Da Biere was introduced to racing by his father, who worked for Pepsi-Cola Company delivering soda in the Capital Region. One of his delivery stops was Fonda Speedway, where he started getting passes to the races. His father first brought him there in 1953 and he became an instant fan. Da Biere has returned every year for the last 57 years.

“As a kid I always said I would race at Fonda Speedway. Of course all the kids said that,” remembers Da Biere.

However, Da Biere went from being a spectator to participant in racing in the South Side of Amsterdam in the summer of 1954. A nearby garage had its own stock car, and Da Biere loved to stop by and look at it.

The garage owner, noting the interest shown by Da Biere, invited him to help take care of the stock car.

“Well you better learn to work on this thing,” the owner said motioning to the car.

“Sure,” replied Da Biere, excited at the prospect of being involved with a stock car.

“You can start by cleaning the mud off of it,” said the owner.

Next Sunday after church Da Biere was at the garage and ready to work. His expertise would eventually extend far beyond cleaning hubcaps- he became mechanically savvy and used this expertise to spur his racing career, which has included victories at Fonda Speedway, a stint as the official Speedway clown, and induction into the Fonda Speedway Hall of Fame.

Since the 1970s the popularity of car racing in the Capital Region of New York has waned from its peak, a trend confirmed by Howard Commander.

“It’s still great family entertainment. Crowds, especially here at Lebanon Valley, are still good.” says Commander.

“But in that 20 year period from the mid-50s to mid-70s crowds were phenomenal.”

Many of his rival tracks haven't been as fortunate.

Victoria Speedway was closed and converted into equestrian training facility in 1966. Empire Raceways was bulldozed in 1963 and replaced with a department store. Pine Bowl saw its last races in 1964. Smaller tracks slowly melted back into the fields and woods from which they were hewn.

Fonda Speedway has also struggled to draw spectators on the same scale as Lebanon Valley.

Frank Fiden, a disciple of Fonda racer “Jumpin Jack” Johnson, echoes Da Biere and Novak in noting that many of the draws of Golden Age racing have disappeared.

Potential local racers have been pushed from the sport by the vastly increased cost of cars. Modern stock cars, which come complete with safety features that have dramatically reduced the danger of the sports Golden Age, are rarely homemade. Instead they are built at factories and cost tens of thousands of dollars, a far cry from the \$40 car bought by Novak in 1965.

Also, the popular generation of drivers who drew Da Biere and Novak to race and Fiden to the bleachers to watch have largely retired or passed away. Their replacements - traveling, wealthier drivers able to pay their way into the sport - are rarely seen outside their cars or trailers and lack the individual appeal that made older, more accessible drivers the stars they were.

Jack Johnson, 65, had continued racing with great success until he was recently diagnosed with cancer. He now plans to ease out of the sport.

“Its just not the same without him at the track,” says Fiden, who has started going to Fonda Speedway less frequently than he used to.

Widespread Lack of Accuracy in Civil War Reporting

April 14, 2009

The American Civil War broke out between the Northern states of the Union and the newly seceded Southern states of the Confederacy on April 12, 1861. Realizing that the war would be one of the defining events in the young nation's history, aspiring war reporters from the Union and the Confederacy swiftly flocked to the staging points of the opposing armies, anxious to make names for themselves as war correspondents. The North alone sent about 500 reporters to the war zone, with the *New York Herald, Times* and *Tribune* contributing roughly 100 of them. Countless sketch artists, still far more common and practical than photographers like Matthew Brady, hurried to the front to recreate battle scenes for illustrated publications such as *Harper's Weekly Magazine*.

The recent invention of the telegraph allowed these eager reporters to transmit accounts of army movements and battles back to Northern and Southern cities with unprecedented speed, making it possible for articles to be printed on a next-day basis. While the news was more quickly printed and readily available than ever before (thanks to the advent of cheap "penny papers"), the quality of reporting on military matters was often poor during the Civil War. (Knightley 44-66) Examination of the newspaper coverage for the battles of Bull Run (July 21, 1861), Shiloh (April 6-7, 1862), Vicksburg (May 18-July 4, 1863) and Gettysburg (July 1-3, 1863) reveal that newspaper coverage by Northern and Southern newspapers alike was highly imperfect.

The newspapers examined were chosen partly out of necessity and partly for their value. Archives of Southern newspapers are very hard to come by, as most of the publications have been bought or closed many years ago. Records of the Southern *Charleston Daily Courier*, *Savannah Republican*, and information about the Confederate Press Association were selected out of the need to find Confederate newspaper coverage of any kind. Northern newspapers were better archived in the years since the Civil War. This paper uses the *New York Times* and *Harpers Weekly* as papers representing the coverage of the North because they were prominent and have been well archived. This paper focuses strictly on the accuracy of the text pertaining to the chosen battles the day(s) after the battle took place (news about a battle was not printed for at least a day after it took place). Maps and pictures could have been analyzed had they been

available, but the Southern papers were typically devoid of images. The battles selected for this research were all major clashes which generated ample coverage to be examined. Two battles, Bull Run and Shiloh, were selected to see what coverage was like early in the war, and Gettysburg and Vicksburg were chosen to see if accuracy had changed later in the war. The articles from these respective issues were examined and the facts within them compared to accepted historical accounts to determine the accuracy of the reporting.

In July of 1861, the Union army under General Irvin McDowell marched from its assembly point around Washington D.C. to meet the Confederate army under Generals P. G. T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnson at their encampment in northern Virginia along Bull Run Creek. With the first opportunity for revenge looming after the fall of Fort Sumter to the Southerners, Northerners watched events unfold in Virginia with great anticipation. Large groups of reporters, politicians, dignitaries, and hanger-ons actually followed the Union army hoping to witness a historic victory and enjoy a picnic at the same time. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 1) Those who could not be at the battle no doubt eagerly anticipated newspaper reports on the outcome.

On July 22, the *New York Times* blazoned on its front page the headline: "Victory at Bull's Run-Sumter avenged." The *Times* article claimed a total victory for Union forces over the Confederate army in northern Virginia the previous day. The article described the Northerners as "...not only driving the enemy from their formidable positions, but seizing all their guns and equipment..." (THE NEW YORK TIMES) In fact, Bull Run was an undisputed defeat for Northern arms. The reality was that by nightfall of July 21, the routed Union army, mixed with terrified onlookers, was streaming back towards its forward base at Centreville in disorder. The Confederate army remained firmly in control of the battlefield. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 1) Confederate coverage of this battle could not be found. I include Northern Bull Run coverage because of the similarity between the mistake made by the *New York Times* and the following Southern newspaper, the *Charleston Daily Courier*, at the battle of Shiloh.

The western Tennessee battle of Shiloh, while not huge in comparison to later battles in the war, was the largest battle in American history when fought. The battle took place from April 6-7, 1862 when the Confederate army under Generals P. G. T. Beauregard and Albert Sidney Johnson moved to counter the advance of the Union armies of Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Don Carlos Buell across Tennessee. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 2) In its April 8 edition a South Carolina

paper, *The Charleston Daily Courier*, made the same grievous mistake as the *New York Times* before it, incorrectly reporting the outcome of the battle at Shiloh. The paper cited an official dispatch from Beauregard to the Confederate War Office in Richmond Virginia to declare in its main headline “The Victory Complete.” In addition to the erroneous dispatch from Beauregard, the *Courier* reprinted a dispatch from the *Savannah Republican* which described the Northern soldiers as being “in full retreat” and the entire Union army as being in danger of being captured. In a moment of hubris the correspondent declared that the battle should be considered a “second Manassas [the Southern name for the battle of Bull Run]” for Confederate forces. (THE MITCHELL ARCHIVES) It quickly became obvious that these reports and predictions were incorrect. The Confederate army was successful in driving back the Union army on April 6, but was not on the verge of capturing the entire force. By nightfall Grant had secured a defensive line and halted the Southern advance. On April 7 Grant was massively reinforced by the divisions of Buell and proceeded to drive the badly outnumbered Confederates from the battlefield completely. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 2)

The *New York Times* provided coverage of mixed quality on Shiloh (which it referred to as the battle of Pittsburg or Pittsburg Landing). On April 8 the paper simply reprinted dispatches from the Union commander of the western theater of the war, General Henry Halleck. His extremely brief report described the battle as an unmitigated victory, not mentioning the near defeat of Union forces on April 6. By April 9 and 10 however, the paper was reporting bluntly and accurately the difficulty the Union forces had fending off the surprise attack of the Confederates and the heavy casualties suffered by both sides. The *Times* also provided an accurate list of generals killed and wounded, and had even learned of the death of Southern commander General Albert Sydney Johnson. The only mistakes included in later reports were a high estimate of Union troop strength (80,000 men as opposed the less than 70,000 on the field) and an incorrect description of the Union counterattack. The overall situation was nonetheless correctly represented. (NEW YORK TIMES)

In the summer of 1863 the Army of Virginia under General Robert E. Lee advanced northward into the Union state of Pennsylvania. The South was hopeful that their most powerful army, deep inside Union territory, would be decisively victorious. The North watched anxiously as the vaunted Confederates under Lee moved closer to major cities like Harrisburg and Philadelphia.

Moving quickly to meet him, the Union army under General George Meade collided with the Confederates outside the small town of Gettysburg on July 1, 1863. After three days of bloody fighting, the Union army prevailed and forced the Confederates to retreat, ending the battle which is considered to be the turning point of the Civil War. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 3) The illustrated magazine *Harpers Weekly* of New York City, like other newspapers and magazines across the North and South, reported heavily on the battle.

Unlike earlier battles, the Northern reporting on Gettysburg was generally accurate. *Harpers* provided an accurate description of the layout of the battlefield, and released correct descriptions of the action and death of Union corps commander General John Reynolds on the first day of battle. In its coverage of July 2, *Harpers* provided troops estimates for the two armies, claiming that both armies had concentrated about 80,000 at Gettysburg, a decent estimation by the standards of the day. (HARPERS WEEKLY) The Army of the Potomac is believed to have contained about 95,000 soldiers during the Gettysburg campaign, and not all of them were concentrated at Gettysburg on the second day of the battle. Confederate forces never numbered more than 75,000 troops. (THE EXTRAODINARY BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG) *Harpers*' stated number is fairly close for both armies, especially considering that Northern correspondents had no access of any kind to the Confederate army.

Coverage broke down briefly when reporting on the events of July 2. *Harpers* reported that "little infantry fighting" occurred and that neither "party made much impression on each other." (HARPERS WEEKLY) This was not the case. Late on July 2nd, the Confederate corps of General James Longstreet assaulted the southern flank of the Union lines, devastating the entire Northern army corps under General Dan Sickles and clawed its way to the top of a bitterly contested hill called Little Round Top before being repulsed. This fighting was crucial to the outcome of the battle, as the retention of Little Round Top saved the Union position. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 3) *Harpers* quickly redeemed itself with accurate reporting of both the Union and Confederate actions on July 3, the day of Pickett's Charge. It reported accurately that the Confederate cannonade preceding the charge was "large and incessant" and that the Confederate dead numbered in the hundreds (a low figure, but excusable given the chaos surrounding Pickett's charge). (HARPERS WEEKLY)

Confederate reporters, far away from friendly telegram wires back to the South, had a difficult time providing their newspapers with any information on Gettysburg. The "Press Association of the Confederate States of America," hereafter referred to as the "PA," was a news cooperative which provided articles to papers across the South. It was only able to have one reporter with the Army of Northern Virginia at the time of Gettysburg. What little news that reached the South was vague and Southern newspapers resorted to simply reprinted battle accounts published in Northern papers in lieu of any useful PA reporting. (THE CONFEDERATE PRESS ASSOCIATION)

In December of 1862 the Union Army of Major General Ulysses S. Grant marched against the Confederate Mississippi River stronghold at Vicksburg, Mississippi. In a masterful and complicated campaign, Grant successfully besieged the city and forced the surrender of Confederate Lieutenant General John Pemberton and his entire army. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 4) The Press Association of the Confederate States of America, while unable to effectively cover the battle of Gettysburg, did provide almost daily dispatches from the beleaguered city of Vicksburg. The dispatches from the city, however dutiful in their arrival across the South, contained major factual errors. One PA dispatch claimed that the Confederate Army had killed 10,000 Union soldiers and captured 40,000 more in fighting around the city. (THE CONFEDERATE PRESS ASSOCIATION) This absurd number, if true, would have constituted well over half of Grant's roughly 70,000 man army. Over the course of the entire eight month campaign to capture Vicksburg, Grant lost slightly over 10,000 men. By the spring of 1863 the Southern soldiers and civilians trapped within the Union cordon at Vicksburg had been reduced to near starvation. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 4) During this time period the PA reported that "plentiful" foodstuffs remained inside the city. The patently false content of PA articles led the editor of the *Richmond Examiner* to describe it as "an unintelligible compound of gas, braggadocio, blunder, absurdity and impossibility." (THE CONFEDERATE PRESS ASSOCIATION)

Northern coverage of the Vicksburg campaign proved to be more accurate than that provided by the PA. *Harpers Weekly* provided coverage even more accurate and insightful than that published during the Gettysburg campaign. The magazine published notably accurate reports of the Battle of Black River Bridge (fought shortly before the siege of Vicksburg), claiming that the Union army captured 2,000 Confederate prisoners and 13 artillery pieces. This number was very close to the 1,700 prisoners taken by Union troops. (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE 4) It also provided

analysis of the battle which today conforms to that of major historians and books. It credited a great deal of the Northern success to the efforts of Union corps commander McPherson, and indeed, he is widely recognized to have been one of Grant's most able generals. (*HARPERS WEEKLY*)

This analysis presents some clear trends in news reporting as the Civil War progressed. In all the battles examined, even the most prominent and distinguished of papers, both Northern and Southern, were prone to making serious errors. It is worth noting that the most serious mistakes in reporting were on events which took place in the evening: the Union route at Bull Run, The Confederate halt at Shiloh, and the massive assault by Longstreet at Gettysburg all took place late in the afternoon at a time when correspondents would be seeking to telegram already written articles to their respective newspapers. This time constraint caused the omission or misreporting of these important events. Accuracy clearly took the back seat to speed and earnings in reporting on these battles. As time passed reports would get progressively more accurate. *New York Times* reporting in the immediate aftermath of Shiloh was incomplete and lacked detail. After the passage of a couple days, coverage became more complete. *Harpers Weekly* has the best track record for accuracy of the papers examined. Again, time constraints, or lack thereof can help explain this. As a weekly publication with no daily deadline, *Harpers* had ample time to compile information and compose accurate war correspondence.

Correspondence on both sides also appears to have been inaccurate for reasons of bias and patriotism. The Northern reporting on the battle of Bull Run was possibly tainted by a desire to see the surrender of the Union garrison of Fort Sumter avenged. In the cases of Shiloh and Vicksburg nothing other than blind optimism or a deliberate attempt to boast morale could explain the mistakes of Southern newspapers. A third and final possible explanation for the reporting errors could simply be the inexperience of green war reporters learning the tricks of the trade the hard way. Regardless of the reason, and there are possibly more than this examination revealed, war reporting during the American Civil War was not of high quality. Some publications, such as *Harpers Weekly*, managed to print an accurate account of battles on a regular basis. Of the five newspapers and press organizations examined here, only *Harpers* did so. Glaring inaccuracies such as incorrect casualty figures, troop strength reports, and battle

outcomes were common in all the other cases. In the samples of war correspondence examined here, accurate war reporting was the exception, not the rule during the American Civil War.

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Extreme Claims Blur Philippine Election Automation Debate

October 25, 2009

The Commission on Elections plans to replace the Philippines' century-old manual system of voting with electronically automated machines has been described divergently as "A dream that has become a reality" by the government and "A black hole of risks" by skeptics of the plan.

In accordance with Republic Act 9369 authorizing voting automation in the 2010 elections, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) approved a \$7.3 billion peso order for 80,000 voting machines from the consortium Smartmatic-Total Information Management. The automation units (AUs), which were certified for use by the Supreme Court in September, digitally read and count paper ballots inserted into them before transmitting the results to COMELEC officials using landline, cellular, or satellite communications.

COMELEC officials have confidence in automation, bragging that it will run smoothly and significantly reduce voting fraud.

"We expect everything to be fine," Comelec Chairman Jose Melo declared in September, summarizing the COMELEC prediction for election automation.

Despite COMELEC assurances, fears have run high that the AUs will not be up to their task, possibly failing or being corrupted on a large enough scale as to produce indeterminate or fraudulent election results.

COMELEC's portrayal of automation as a cure-all for the many ills of the Philippine electoral system is exaggerated, as are dire predictions of failure voiced by some skeptics of the plan. These respective claims blur the truth in the highly technical and procedural debate over automation.

The most likely result of election automation in 2010 will be a modest decrease in voting fraud and the amount of time necessary to compile election results, with neither problem being solved. A complete failure of the election seems very unlikely.

COMELEC has steadfastly maintained that elections will not fail on a national level as a result of broken AU's. In September, COMELEC Chairmen Jose Melo clarified that any failure would be

on a local level - likely as a result of extenuating circumstances such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks.

Multiple steps have been taken to ensure that dysfunctional AUs will not be the source of election difficulties. AUs are equipped with batteries capable of providing power for twelve hours in order to avoid their being rendered useless by power outages. Because of the rough treatment the machines will endure on the dilapidated roads and rough terrain in rural voting precincts, steps have been taken to provide extra AUs in case some break.

At the Automation Forum sponsored by the University of the Philippines National College of Public Administration and Governance (NCPAG) earlier this month, COMELEC Commissioner Sarmiento noted that 82,200 AUs have been ordered, but only 80,136 are slated to be deployed initially. The remaining 2064 will be held in reserve to replace any machines which become disabled during the course of shipment or voting.

Also, the machines have been tested in accordance with the “minimum system capability standards” set forth by COMELEC’s and certified as adequate by the Supreme Court.

Pablo Manalastas, a computer programmer and Professor in the Ateneo De Manila University Computer Science Department was an observer of the COMELEC Special Bids and Awards Committee (SBAC) during the testing, and questions the quality of the COMELEC evaluation.

Malanastas has concerns that AU testers, who were primarily lay employees of COMELEC and not software engineers with technological expertise, may have modified testing standards to ensure that the machines passed.

“Little mods like this erode your faith in the correctness of the SBAC testing” Malanastas said.

However, he agrees that “There will be no failure of elections,” noting that the AUs can easily be transformed into manual voting boxes, albeit expensive ones, should vote totals fail to be transmitted electronically.

“The ballot box will be opened, and the votes counted manually,” Malanastas explained.

“How this will be done within the context of allowable COMELEC regulations will still be threshed out by COMELEC's implementing rules and regulations (IRRs)...” The IRRs are due to be released later this year.

At the NCPAG forum, Commissioner Sarmiento argued that the speed of AU vote tabulation is a necessary upgrade from the lengthy manual system which has been in place since the first Philippine Assembly was elected in 1907.

In 2004 it took over a month for the manual system to provide the results of the Presidential and Vice Presidential races, and in 2007 it took over two months to tabulate the results of the Senatorial races.

COMELEC predicts that in the 2010 elections it will take just two days to count and canvass election returns of national races with the use of AUs. This estimation is predicated on automation occurring successfully in every voting precinct in the nation, a concept Prof Manalastas finds unrealistic.

“With the destruction caused by Typhoons Ondoy and Pepeng to the schools, basketball courts and other places that will be used for precincts in Metro Manila and Northern Luzon, I have doubts that COMELEC will be able to do even 50% computerization of the entire country” Manalastas said.

Even if a fraction of precincts are automated, the machines in use will increase the speed of ballot counting over that of past elections. But it is implausible that COMELEC will be able to compile elections results in just two days.

Early this year COMELEC Legal Department Chief Ferdinand Rafanan boasted to reporters that automation would practically eliminate election fraud, another unrealistic prediction. At most, AUs will have a marginal impact on the widespread electoral fraud found in most Philippine elections.

The paper ballots used by AUs are equipped with security features to combat forgery, but can still be stolen and prefilled. Voters will be susceptible to coercion and can have their votes bought regardless of the method of voting used.

Commissioner Sarmiento noted that “violence, intimidation, threats, shipping of ballots and election paraphernalia” can occur “outside the system” of changes made by automation.

A televised September 21 edition of “ANC Presents: A 2010 Poll Automation Forum” provided insight into the procedural intricacies of automation and the inability of AUs to eliminate fraud.

Members of the Forum panel, which included the Chairman of COMELEC’s Special Bids and Awards Committee Ferdinand Rafanan and Smartmatic’s International Sales Director Cesar Flores, discussed what steps had been taken to combat voting fraud. They highlighted the fact that paper ballots will be manufactured for use in a specific precinct and machines will be program to reject more ballots than there are registered voters in a precinct as a way of avoiding ballot shipping and ballot stuffing.

However, un-purged voter rolls and ballots leftover from voter turnout below 100% ensure that excess ballots will be available for potential cheating. Furthermore, the fill-in-the-bubble design of the ballots unintentionally makes voting fraud harder to detect by eliminating signs of cheating, such as handwriting samples and abnormal vote totals.

Mandatory digital fingerprint verification of voters has been proposed as a means of reducing fraud and is intended to go into effect in the 2013 elections.

Fears of AUs being used to facilitate high tech fraud are also unrealistic. The Supreme Court declared in a September court ruling that the electronic method of vote transmission is sufficiently secure enough to prevent tampering.

COMELEC, which is staffed primarily by lawyers, not computer experts, has placed a great deal of responsibility for the operation of the machines, and thus the election, with Smartmatic/TIM. This has prompted criticism that COMELEC has outsourced responsibility to a foreign business organization capable of being influenced and infiltrated by those seeking to manipulate the election.

One allegation is the COMELEC officials have been careless with the fate of the AU “source code;” the computer programming which will be installed into the AUs before the election

The “source code,” in accordance with RA 9369, must be released by Smartmatic/TIM to political parties and interested parties in order to be reviewed to ensure the AUs have been programmed correctly.

However, the code has not yet been released, a point of great contention for those anxious to review it. Manalastas has repeatedly called for the release of the source code.

“I believe that COMELEC must allow source code review now, while there is still time for review, so that the public can see the conformance or non-conformance of the PCOS (AUs) to RA-9369 and the COMELEC Terms of Reference (ToR),” he said.

Furthermore, Smartmatic/TIM will have significant authority over access keys and codes for the AUs.

“This is bullshit, because it gives Smartmatic power to change all precinct election returns, then re-sign them with the private keys (which they have) and pass this modified precinct election return as if it was the original,” Manalastas contends.

Despite the serious impact the source code and access keys could have on the election, it should be kept in mind that they are contractual, not technical issues. The AUs cannot be faulted if the elections are to be fouled by those issues.

In many ways it seems that election automation may be an example of the cart being put before the horse. However reliable the AUs may prove to be, procedural and criminal problems, or acts of God such as Typhoon Ondoy, will alter the 2010 elections as they have Philippine elections of the past. As long as a corrupt human element is involved with voting, the AUs will do little to curb election fraud and speed up an accurate tally of vote totals.

Squatters and Decay Tarnish National University

October 5, 2009

The flagship campus of University of the Philippines, located in the Diliman neighborhood of Quezon City, continues to struggle with burgeoning squatter settlements and poor maintenance a year after its prominent centennial celebration. The woes of the government subsidized university are attributed to systematic underfunding, neglect and the sensitive nature of the squatter issue.

The University of the Philippines Diliman (UPD) consistently ranks among the best schools in Asia and as the premier university in the country, beating out better funded private schools such as cross-town rival Ateneo De Manila University (ADMU). It boasts alumni such as former Presidents Ferdinand Marcos and Manuel Roxas, current Supreme Court Justice Reynato Puno, and numerous celebrities.

However, the appearance of the school does not match its sterling academic reputation. Rats scurry in the dimly light hallways of unmaintained buildings, trash litters the sides of pot-holed marred streets, and tens of thousands of squatters inhabit crude shack settlements covering dozens of campus acres.

According to a 2005 school report by Cecilla Ibay, more than 20,000 squatter families occupy 66 hectares, or 13%, of the UPD campus. Altogether, Ibay identifies fifteen different sectors of squatter settlement.

Some decades-old areas of squatter development are so well established that they have essentially become regular neighborhoods of Quezon City, complete with roads, gas stations, electric grids, and sewage systems.

However, many squatters live amongst the undeveloped woods and creeks of the vast UPD campus. From a distance, only the reflection of the sun off the aluminum roofs of the squatter's shacks betrays their presence. A closer look reveals settlements of hundreds living amongst the greenery, complete with cement paths and basketball courts. Children, often naked or wearing

just basketball jerseys, run laughing through the woods and splash around in the streams on hot days, while their mothers wash clothes and hang them out to dry on clotheslines suspended between trees.

The rent-free existence in the cool, shady woods of the UPD campus is certainly a boon for squatters considering they are one of the poorest demographics in a very impoverished nation. However, their presence is a major strain on the campus.

Squatters have been, and continue to be, a major obstruction to the development of university facilities. Two areas of squatter settlement currently lie on land earmarked for the construction of the new Commission on Higher Education headquarters and the Magsaysay Dormitory Complex.

Squatter settlements receive no access to running water, sewer pipes, or trash removal services. As a result, the household and human waste they generate gets dumped in the fields and streams of the campus. Cement bricks, tires and other refuse clutters the woods in the area along Pardo De Tavera Avenue before its intersection with C.P. Garcia Avenue, just one example of the ill effects of squatter dumping.

Rampant crime on campus is largely a result of the inability of the UPD's security force to control tens of thousands more people than it was intended to.

Among the areas of campus free from squatter settlement, problems abound for the University nonetheless. Numerous infrastructure and maintenance deficiencies cry out for improvement.

A walk through the Faculty Center, a three-story structure built in 1968, reveals dingy walls, dusty ceiling lights, a dysfunctional elevator converted into a storage closet, and unchanged trash bins.

Outside the third floor office of Assistant Professor Gene Pilapil sits one such fragrant trash can filled to the brim with snack wrappers, empty soda cans and topped off with a wrinkly brown banana peel. An army of ants, barely visible in the dim lighting, convey morsels of food from the bin to a crack in the wall.

Pilapil first enrolled at UPD in 1985 and graduated in 1990. After holding teaching jobs at the UPD twice during the 1990s, he returned as a full time faculty member in 2004.

In sharp contrast to the hallway, Pilapil's office was fresh and neat. In fact, he described it as "great" for him. However it was Mr. Pilapil, not the university, who spruced up the office.

"My room is great because I have done the upgrade myself. It is the building (Faculty Center) that is the problem. Once you step out of my room, it is a different world," Mr. Pilapil explained.

"I am sure that someone with an eye to campus maintenance would be as appalled as I am on the state of maintenance of the building for the faculty of its two biggest colleges," Pilapil said, referring to the College of Arts and Letters and the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy.

From Pilapil's perspective, which he acknowledged was affected by his location at CAL, the condition and appearance of the UPD campus has remained stagnated or even declined since his time as a student.

The University Arcade and the UP San Fernando Diliman Extension Office are two more examples of deteriorating infrastructure. A glance inside the shattered windows of the Arcade reveals collapsing ceilings, filthy walls, and spongy floors littered with trash, dirt, and glass shards. The building is such an eyesore that it frightens off students looking to go for a swim at the adjacent University Pool. The dirty and weathered walls of the Extension Office look equally decrepit.

The University Shopping Center is a favorite target of vandals on campus. Much of the graffiti calls for the ouster of President Arroyo from office in response to her proposed amendments to the 1987 Philippine Constitution.

Sagot sa krisis-Rebulyson! (Solution to the crisis-Revolution!)" declares one spray painted slogan authored by student supporters of the "New People's Army," the militant wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

The UPD's problems are particularly acute when compared to the nation's other top schools. The campuses of Far Eastern University, De La Salle University, and Ateneo De Manila University are modern, well maintained, and have prevented the establishment of squatter settlements.

A comparison between the dormitories of UPD and rival neighbor ADMU highlight the neglect at the former institution.

UPD has not constructed a new undergraduate dormitory since 1976 according to Pilapil, who notes that the student population has since tripled. As a result, existing dorms are overcrowded and battered from years of use. Most lack air conditioning, leaving the packed rooms unbearably hot during the summer months. None of the dorms are equipped with internet or phone connections.

In sharp contrast, ADMU's Cervini Hall, built in 1968, boasts an adjacent swimming pool, air-conditioned study rooms and, according to the ADMU website, "is the first dormitory in the Philippines to provide room-to-room Internet access."

In 2007 ADMU constructed a twin tower housing complex known as University Dormitory. Standing seven stories tall and complete with a view of the Marikina Valley, the dorm is able to accommodate over 600 students.

College of Mass Communications Professor Tessa Jazmines attended the UPD from 1964 to 1968, graduating with a degree in journalism. She was hired by the school as a researcher after her graduation and has remained employed at her *alma mater*.

Jazmines became best acquainted with the student dorms during her tenure as Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs (VCSA) from 1999 to 2005, the position responsible for dormitories.

Staff strives to maintain the dorms, but lack the resources to do all that is needed to ensure proper upkeep according to Jazmines.

"They are still clean and respectable inside; that is, the staff makes do with available resources. But some are in bad shape: roofs leak, windows are broken, the condition of the paint sucks,

there is no water in some dorms, and a lot of bulbs have to be replaced.” Jazmines wrote in reply to an inquiry about the condition of the UPD dormitories.

The reason for the sub-par appearance of the UPD campus seems clear to both Jazmines and Pilapil.

“We do not have the resources,” Pilapil said, seconding the assessment made by Jazmines.

The UP Vice President for finance and development Prof. Concepcion Alfiler went on record in 2008 as saying that the “erratic allocation” of funds by the national government left the UP system short of funds.

“Whenever we have a small budget, the allocation for equipment, new school buildings and special projects will suffer...” Alfiler said

The UP system received just an average of 60.2% of its proposed budgets between 2000 and 2008- funds which had to be split between the various campuses and the Philippine General Hospital.

The 2008 budget was the most substantial increase in funds in the past decade, raising the budget for the UP system over \$6 billion pesos for the first time.

Even if the money situation improves, the University remains divided on how to deal with the more complex issue of squatters. The school administration sees a need for their removal while others, primarily student organizations, protest plans for their eviction on humanitarian grounds.

There is so little consensus that it remains unclear whether to describe “squatters” as such or to use the politically correct phrase “informal settlers”

Even if there was a consensus to remove squatters from university land, the school would likely lack the ability and resources to implement such a policy, Pilapil notes. Philippine law protects squatters from outright eviction unless alternate housing is provided, a potentially prohibitive expense for the University. The UPD already struggles with simply preventing the spread of squatter settlement.

“UP's land area is so huge, it's very difficult to monitor the informal structures that come up in every nook and cranny of the campus.” Prof. Jazmines said.

While Pilapil has concerns with the physical integrity of the UPD, he is convinced that the school remains academically dominant in the Philippines.

“As I have said, UP is still the best university in the country. No doubt about that,” Pilapil said. Despite its shortcomings, the campus remains popular among students and faculty.

As a child Jazmines used to pass through campus often.

“We used to pass through UP to get to my high school and back then, I envied the students who went to UP because it had a beautiful, sprawling campus,” Jazmines recalled. Her attitude hasn't changed.

“I love the sprawl of the campus, the trees, the Lagoon, the pocket gardens, the Academic Oval, the fact that you can breathe (relatively) clean air and be yourself inside UP. I love the Landmarks as well -- the Oblation, the Carillon, the Arboretum and the UP Chapel, in particular. I love UP, period.” she said.

“I still think it's the best campus in Metro Manila. Or elsewhere.”

Despite lingering cash shortfalls and a persistent backlog of maintenance projects, efforts by UP to improve the campus may be gaining traction.

“After the centennial celebration last year, UP as a whole and individual units in particular were able to raise funds for their specific needs. So things are slowly getting better and better,” Jazmines noted.

A score of building and maintenance projects are in the works for the campus. Projects include reroofing, the installation of new jeepney stops, electrical re-wiring, and the construction of a new Faculty Center.

Land threatened by squatters along Commonwealth Avenue has been turned into a seemingly successful venture for the University in the form of the UP-Ayalaland Technohub, a land use partnership between UP and the Ayala Corporation subsidiary Ayala Land.

Such improvements, which allow UP to raise money and improve its image, could prove to be the catalyst the university needs to rehabilitate its campus.

Dead Animals

April 1, 2010

For me, wintertime will forever be associated with dead animals. Between the ages of twelve and sixteen I witnessed scores of animals executed, run down, chopped up, or killed by accidental causes in the bitter cold of the long Maine winter.

The animal slaughter began in late 1999. In the spring of that year my family had purchased and begun operating “Pine Grove Campground and Cottages,” a 20-acre plot of evergreens and campsites situated on the east bank of the Penobscot River in central Maine. From our previous home in Caribou, Maine we shipped our little army of critters: dog Hutch, two cats Lilly and Remington, guinea pig Squeaky, and rabbit Truffles.

That summer our pets happily settled into their new home. Hutch had acres of woods to romp around, a pond and river to swim in, and dozens of campers to mooch food off of. Truffles spent his time bouncing around in a fenced-in enclosure munching on clovers and grass. Lilly and Remington went to work massacring moles, mice and birds in the yard, often depositing them as gifts on our doorstep. Little did they know only one of them would ever leave Pine Grove alive.

Truffles went first, a forbearance of events to come. In November, right before the first snows of winter fell, he went permanently missing from his pen. A few days later we spotted a plump red fox slinking around our house, no doubt digesting our big-eared friend.

Although not officially winter in November, it often feels like it is in Maine. Ice begins creeping out from the riverbanks, spurred on by frigid wind gusting down the river valley. Snow blankets the frozen ground and trees. With that snow comes deer and moose hunters. My family had

decided to keep the cabins open throughout the winter in order to accommodate hunters, and they were soon filled with beer-guzzling, gun-toting men from across New England.

With the hunters came deer and moose carcasses. Suspended by their necks from trees scattered around the campground, their stomachs were sliced open by the hunters so their blood and guts could drain into buckets. In order to avoid attracting the attention of blood-thirsty coyotes, my father asked me to take the buckets of entrails and toss them into the river. Skidding down the icy riverbank to complete my task I fell backwards, spilling a bucket of deer blood all over my face. My brother and sister thought this was hilarious, slapping their legs and laughing as they watched from the top of the bank, but I didn't find my first taste of the animal carnage enjoyable at all - especially when it began freezing onto my face in the frigid wind.

By December the hunters and their trophies cleared out. The snow had deepened, and I took up cross-country skiing. One day while making a new trail through an unexplored part of the campground I spotted something in the distance. It was a big circle of feathers with a red stain in the center, as if someone had hit a target with a down-filled hand grenade. Shuffling closer on my skis, the body of an elusive Horned Owl became visible, pushed down into the snow face-up and covered with blood. No doubt formerly a handsome bird, the owl's stomach had been picked clean by some creature. Saddened by the regal bird's demise, I covered his body with snow to serve as a makeshift grave.

A few weeks after I discovered the owl, our dog Hutch went missing. Put outside to relieve himself after dinner, he never returned home. He was an old dog, and we assumed he went off into the forest to die.

Eventually spring of 2000 came, and the melting snow revealed the fenced-in area formerly inhabited by Truffles. Our rabbit was badly missed, so Dad surprised us by returning home with two young bunnies to replace him. As the grass became green and the days warmed, my sister decided she wanted a dog to play with. She went to the shelter and returned with a sweet but unintelligent Husky named Keyta. Like our previous pets, these new family members loved their new home.

With the return of November returned the fatalities. One my way out to do some chores one frosty day, I spotted our two rabbits lying motionless on their sides. I moved closer, only to confirm that their still bodies were lifeless and stiff. They had a warm, straw-filled house in their pen, and the weather was not yet cold enough to have affected them. Oddly, they bore no marks or injuries. Their demise remains a mystery, creepily similar to deaths in a Stephen King novel or alien movie.

Just a few weeks later tragedy befell Keyta. She was a comically stupid animal, prone to stealing and devouring loafs of breads still inside of plastic bags and accidentally bumping her head into walls. One night my sister let her outside to relieve herself. She didn't return that night, and the next day we formed a search party to go look for her. We didn't have to go far. On the river in front of our house we discovered a set of tracks on the thin, snow-dusted ice leading outward to a dog sized hole in the center. There was no set of return tracks.

In January, Emily discovered Squeaky dead in his cage. Unable to bury him in the frozen earth we ordered my then 5-year-old brother Nicolas to stash him on a shelf in an abandoned outhouse until he could be properly buried in the spring. Misunderstanding our instructions, Nicolas tossed

Squeaky straight into the pit of the outhouse where he became encased in a grave of frozen human fecal material.

In the summer of 2001 Dad decided it would be wise to upgrade to sturdier pets. Over the course of the summer we acquired two black sheep named Blackberry and Clover from an aging farmer, a goat named Goat from our plumber, and a hideous grey Vietnamese pot belly pig named Molly from a woman who wanted to discard it after it grew from a cute piglet to a full-sized hog.

The first causality of that winter was not one of our own animals. My mother, who worked the nightshift as a phlebotomist to supplement our income, often carpooled to her hospital with a friend and coworker named Denise. Denise loved to speed down even the most windy and rural of roads in her sporty Ford Mustang. Racing down our street to pick up my mother one night, Denise took a corner too fast, crashing into a deer standing in the road. Denise and her car were relatively unscathed, but she could tell the deer had suffered a broken leg as it hobbled into the woods.

Eating road kill is both common and socially acceptable in Maine. If the driver of a vehicle is killed in the accident, the offending deer or moose that caused the collision is butchered and sent to food pantries or homeless shelters.

My Dad decided he wanted to eat this deer, so the next day the two of us drove to the scene of the accident. We got out of the car and followed the deer tracks into the woods. We knew we were following the right tracks, as there were only three hoof prints. Sure enough we found the deer about a half mile into the woods, dead from shock. We tied ropes to his legs and dragged him through the snow to our house. Upon reaching home we realized we lacked the proper tools to butcher the deer. Always a practical man, my father decided a chain saw would suffice. I had

my doubts about the idea, but Dad proved me wrong. The saw blade ripped pieces of deer flesh and fur off the carcass, spitting them backwards in a spray of blood all over my father as it shattered through the animal's bones, tendons and meat. As grisly as our chainsaw butchering method was, it ultimately proved quite effective in removing the limbs of the deer. Soon the deer was scattered about the yard in eight jagged pieces. We carved the flesh off the deer chunks with our sharpest kitchen knives, packed it up in Ziploc bags, and stashed it in our outdoor icebox.

Ultimately, most of the deer meat and hard work went to waste. We decided to save the meat and prepare it at Christmas time in honor of our visiting relatives. With our hungry family assembled around the dinner table on Christmas Eve, Dad announced that he had improperly prepared the meat, leaving it gamey and tasteless to the point of being inedible. We attempted to salvage the venison by adding it to a hastily cooked stew. However, I over-boiled the noodles intended for that dish, and the resulting combination was a mushy and bland slop interspersed with leathery meat chunks. After twenty minutes spent choking down spoonfuls of the stew, we broke down and cooked two Red Baron frozen pizzas as an impromptu Christmas dinner.

In January our cat Remington became very ill. Named after Remington Steele, the television character played by my mother's crush Pierce Brosnan, "Remmy" was 19-years-old. Mom, whom Remington loved more than anyone else, doted on him for days. She placed him in a laundry basket lined with blankets and pillows and parked him near our woodstove to make certain he was warm. There he stayed for three days, often purring so loudly he could be heard in adjacent rooms. On the fourth day his purring stopped, and only my cat, Lilly, was left alive from our original batch of pets.

In the summer of 2002 we added a dog, Bailey, to our family. Blackberry, Clover, Molly, and Goat continued their happy lifestyle in and around our barn.

The winter of 2002 started with a close call for Molly and an attempted murder of Goat. After a few months of trying to keep Goat out of trouble I had grown to hate her more than any other animal I have ever known - she hated me right back. She spent her time harassing campers, fighting with their dogs, and even tried chewing on a one-legged woman's prosthetic leg. When campers would complain about the trouble she was causing, I would hunt her down and drag her back to the barn. My attempts to train her were typically responded to with head butts. When I would coax her near to give her a treat she would often squat and urinate before running off, her snack untouched. While it may sound paranoid, I am convinced to this day this action was a deliberate and conscious snub. Furthermore, she was tough. Goat loved to munch on cigarette butts she found lying on the ground, and one time I even saw her eat a fish hook to no ill effect.

That December Goat began a daily ritual of knocking over our trash can and spreading the garbage across the front yard. I was tasked with pulling the frozen trash out of the icy mud that was our yard and returning it to the can each day. After a morning spent prying the skeleton of a rotisserie chicken out of the ice - compliments of Goat - I decided I had to take action. I swore to kill Goat.

The next morning I found the trash once again ripped open and strewn across the lawn. I didn't clean it up, but instead found a cat food can and filled it with toxic anti-freeze. I placed it among the trash and crept behind a nearby wood pile. After a few minutes Goat came wandering out from her home behind the barn and came over to re-inspect the trash. Her nose shaking and sniffing, she quickly zeroed in on the sugary sweet anti-freeze. Right before she began lapping it

up I rushed out from behind the pile and spilled out the anti-freeze. I am glad I didn't go through with this cruel and juvenile plan, regardless of how much I hated Goat.

A week later Molly was almost eaten by coyotes. She broke out of the barn one night, only to be cornered by three of them outside her pen. Hearing her oinks of fear from my bedroom, I ran outside and chased them away before they started chomping on her.

2002 had been a slow business year for us, and by January of 2003 my family was seeking ways to cut our shopping bills. We had a Sam's Club membership, but even buying in bulk wasn't enough to ease our tight budget. Eventually Dad, a lover of mutton and lamb chops, realized that we had those choice meats in bulk right across the yard in our barn. One day he returned from Sam's Club with a jumbo can of mint jelly and announced his intentions to dispatch Blackberry and Clover. There were no objections to this plan, as Blackberry and Clover's lofty and unfriendly personalities had failed to win them any friends in the family.

Nick and Emily fetched the sheep from their pen and tied them to a tree in the yard. Dad loaded two shells into his shotgun and I gassed up the chainsaw. Call me a sissy, but I didn't want to see the sheep shot in the head. As Dad leveled his gun at the face of Blackberry I snuck away to the opposite side of the house. I waited for the first shotgun blast, and then the second. Only when I heard the revving of the chainsaw did I return to the scene of the butchering. Dad, coated with sheep blood and wool, had already sawed one of Blackberry's legs off, and I went to work carving meat off it. Three hours later only a red splotch of snow, a bag of wool, and an icebox full of mutton remained of Blackberry and Clover.

We ended up enjoying many delicious meals thanks to Blackberry and Clover. They brought the string of animal deaths to an end on a high note. Thanks to their contribution to my family I can take comfort in knowing that all the animals did not die in vain.