

Our former staffers reminisce

THE SEQUENCE:

By GARY BLAKELEY



1. Gather your materials.

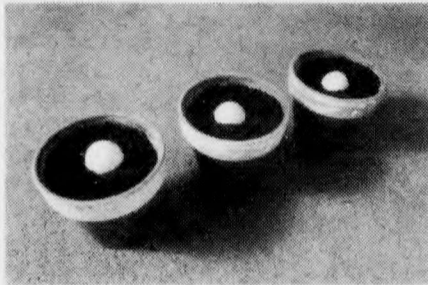
Poultry Raising



2. Add high quality soil to pot.



3. Sow, small end down.



4. Nurture, two months, in a warm environment.



5. Result.



6. Virgil Stump (Treadmill, Ont.) "It changed my life."

The joy of shish kebabing university's sacred cows

Hugh Westrup was Editor of *Excalibur* in 1979. At present, he is a freelance writer for publications such as *Canadian Science News*.

By HUGH WESTRUP

Student newspaper editors are lucky. Years later you read through the old yellowed copies from your year, and there it is: your life spread out before you on paper. For eight full months you poured every ounce of passion into the newspaper, and now, thumbing through the pages, the memories flood back.

It was mid-September of 1979 when York University Vice President John Becker asked me how I would enjoy feeling the toe of his boot pressing down on my face.

Poor Mr. Becker. So early in the school year and already showing the strain of dealing with another obstreperous *Excalibur* editor.

1979-1980 was indeed a time of strain for *Excalibur* and the York University administration. It was my first week on the job, in fact, when *Excalibur's* business manager announced that the newspaper had fallen \$40,000 into debt, of which \$25,000 was owed to the York administration. The university was now demanding repayment and we had not a penny to give them. We hadn't a penny, either, for the company that printed *Excalibur* every week or for our own salaries!

Desperately in need of money to tide us over until the mess could be straightened out, I consulted Vice President Becker about a loan. That's when he showed me the toe of his boot.

From week to week, *Excalibur* hobbled along, a tin-can-and-string operation. Just prior to the revelation of the debt, we had purchased an expensive typesetting machine so that the newspaper could be produced entirely on campus. But now that we were broke, we couldn't buy any of the necessary back-up equipment. Unable to afford a "waxing machine," for example, we depended on the generosity of the York communications department. God knows how many thousand elevator trips we took, most of them in the middle of the night, to the communications department's office on the eighth floor to use the waxing machine there.

Looking back, some people might blame *Excalibur's* financial crisis for the new "conservative" tone of the newspaper that year. Perhaps so, but the year was 1980, the start of a new decade. Students were feeling hostile to the mind-set that had ruled campus politics for so long. Marches, strikes, sit-ins—the old forms of protest seemed little more than worn-out, vacant gestures. And the campus groups that had formed years ago to protect the students' interests had themselves become powerful institutions with their own reactionary politics.

At *Excalibur*, our editorials dutifully lanced all the usual targets: the York administration, the Ontario government, the Atkinson student council. But our real pleasure lay in shish kebabing all those sacred cows which for too long had safely grazed on *Excalibur's* goodwill.

And so, it was the York Women's Centre that *Excalibur* labelled "censorious" when the women there called for "guidelines" to limit the availability of erotica on campus. *Excalibur* deplored the "trade union mentality" of the Graduate Assistants Association when it won a job security clause in its new contract. And when a group of students occupied President Macdonald's office in protest over tuition fee increases, our editorial "Unoccupied minds" let out this blast: "The student occupation of the President's office . . . has to go down as one of the most mindless and misdirected activities to have occurred at York in recent memory . . . Undoubtedly, the 'occupiers' regard themselves as quite radical. They are radical only in that they have discovered yet another means of expressing lack of intelligence."

Encumbered by debt and with a pack of new enemies growling at our doorstep, *Excalibur* nevertheless survived the year. Among the staff there prevailed feelings of joy and camaraderie—a sense that we were genuinely working together. These feelings animated the countless trips to the eighth floor, the numerous battles with creditors, and all the four-o'clock-in-the-morning sessions when the editors would almost choke to death on their own laughter while dreaming up silly headlines for the upcoming issue.

That's how I like to remember it. Not long ago, I met a woman who studied at York while I was there.

"Oh yes, I remember the year you were editor," she said.

"Really?" I replied. "What thing in the newspaper do you best remember?"

"Well," she said. "It was a front-page article on the thousands of cockroaches getting exterminated in grad res."

2 a.m. editorials and toothpick-propped eyes

Warren Clements, *Excalibur* editor in 1974, is perhaps best known as the creator of the *Nestlings* comic strip. But to make ends meet, he had to become an editorial writer for the *Globe & Mail*.

By WARREN CLEMENTS

If this were an *Excalibur* editorial, written circa 1974, I would be struggling at 2 a.m. to find just the right words (and settling for the wrong ones) to assail the cafeteria food or the student council. Others on staff would be cramming loose articles into the unfilled corners of layout sheets and making excuses to the typesetter who, in those days, was situated some distance north of the campus.

Then, hours after we had finally crept away to our beds/couches to dream about student counsellors jumping out of Versafood cakes, the alarm clock would ring. Two or three staff members would drive to the typesetters at noon of the same day, eyes propped open with toothpicks, and sit down at a table covered with proof sheets of the typeset pages. We had to read those pages and correct the mistakes. Half-asleep, we were lucky if we caught any of them. If we were really lucky, we didn't create more.

We told ourselves that these all-nighters built character and were part of the golden memories we would have of the place after we left, which was in part true. I mean, I'm writing about it. But it takes a certain madness to persuade yourself that staying awake so long that your body trembles and shivers with the dawn is an integral part of turning out a weekly newspaper. I've resisted the impulse since then, that's for sure. Brrr.

At home I have two bound volumes of *Excalibur* from the mid-70s, one year when I was entertainment editor under editor Brian Milner (who is at *The Globe and Mail* now) and one year when I was editor with assistant editor Doug Tindal (now working with the United Church of Canada). What strikes me on looking through the pages is, first, the number of budding writers who happened to be at York in those years and were drawn to the paper; many have gone on in journalism, including (and I apologize for an incomplete list) Julian Bel-

trame, Oakland Ross, Michael Hollett, Jennifer Hunter and Rick Spence.

Second, close to every article has a story behind it. Maybe a new writer was trying out his or her skills for the first time, asking for guidance and working gamely to rework a piece that showed promise. Maybe we had a scoop. Maybe we let our enthusiasm get away with us. I remember a photograph of George Dunn, director of safety and security, pointing to the white space on a wall where a stolen painting had hung. Unfortunately, in the published photo you couldn't tell the space from the rest of the wall, with the result that he was "indicating the original position of one of the paintings stolen last week" by pointing at a blank wall. Very helpful.

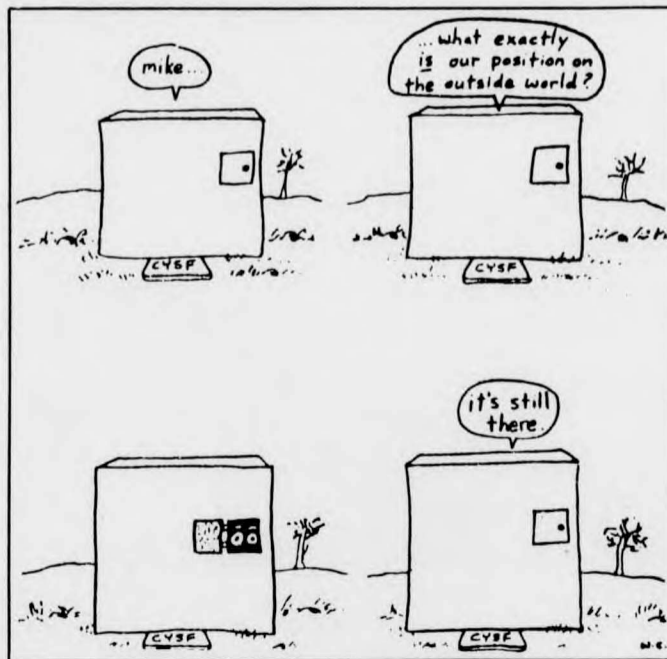
The advertising manager in 1974-75 was Jurgen Lindhorst, who did his job so well that the paper had a healthy surplus at the end of the year; but as in every paper, we editorial types didn't gladly suffer the constraints of a 12-page paper when we had copy to fill 16 pages, and there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth. When we did persuade him to give us 16 pages, we ran some excellent centrespreads, on campus art (Anne Camozzi), the CYSF (Oakland Ross), urban conservation (Anna Vaitieku-

nas), grape and lettuce boycotts (Richard Wagman) and African studies (Chris Gates).

We also had fun. There was Travel Club in 1973, the magazine for Trekkers—a parody of club newsletters based on the shuttle service from York to the subway. Later came Pinballer (the magazine for pinball players), The Toronto Scum (based on a certain tabloid, with the headline *Toads Wreak Havoc, Thousands Homeless*) and a special section on the end of the world. Still, we weren't always a match for the real comedy on campus, including a gentleman called James Smith of the Subterranean Miners Rugby Union who ran for CYSF president by urging students, "Don't vote, and don't eat my campaign posters."

I can't end without a bow to the light columns of Ralph Ashford (who went on to become a policeman) and the excellent illustrations of Peter Hsu (who went on to produce science-fiction comic books populated by naked women, a constant obsession. Keeping them and Rambo-style weaponry out of Peter's editorial cartoons was a running battle.)

But that way lies nostalgia. It was a terrific period, and it gave a lot of us a feeling for what we wanted to do in life. Many of us are still doing it. Here's to *Excalibur's* anniversary.



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