

The Rattler's Den



By Rathburn Rattler

Working on a newspaper is rather like camping in the crater of Mount Vesuvius. You know no one in his — or her — right mind should ever think of doing either . . . but there's always some nut who'll try.

The simile is fairly accurate; with newspapers, as with volcanoes, there's a delightful basic instability about everything. You're never quite sure when the plug will let go . . . and when a newspaper blows, it makes Krakatoa look like a feeble Roman candle.

Indeed, on the basis of stability, one has to give the volcano the edge. It takes years for the underground pressures to build up inside a Vesuvius or Krakatoa, to the point where something has to give. On a newspaper it can happen anytime, without as much as a rumble of warning.

Which is what happened to us last week when our long-suffering news editor, who'd endured heaven knows what without flinching or even twitching, rose suddenly skyward on a pillar of flame and went into a lunar orbit.

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The news editor of a newspaper occupies a position roughly comparable to the uppermost stone on a pyramid — if you stand the pyramid on its point.

On him descend all pressures. If the advertising manager exceeds his percentage of total lineage, the news editor can be counted upon to receive the blame for everything from a drop in

newsstand sales to poor news judgment because some fatuous item in which the publisher was interested was squeezed out.

If his reporters blow a story, or lose a cherished family portrait, or stay out late playing poker, he knows whose phone will ring first — his. And if the front office fouls up the pay cheques, he knows who'll hear about that, too.

But, oh, how they miss him when he's gone!

There are only two indispensable people on a newspaper — the news editor and the office boy — and sometimes you can muddle through without the latter, for the news editor usually knows as much as he did.

Yet, somehow, the survivors of the blast pitch in, and somehow the paper staggers onto the street, more or less as usual.

It may take weeks to discover certain features have been missing ever since the news editor left. By then, of course, some other eager martyr occupies the tip of the pyramid and the whole thrilling cycle has begun once more.

There isn't a medal for news editors. There should be. The Katimavik at Expo — that big inverted pyramid — born on the back of one tiny figure would make a dandy design.

And if you happen to come across a news editor who's reached retirement age on the same paper he began with, take off your hat. He rates the salute.

SUGAR and SPICE

A new togetherness

By BILL SMILEY

There's one thing that brings people together and makes them forget, for a few hours at least, all their normal rotten, little, miserable, petty, private troubles. That is a good smash in the midriff from that gentle old lady, Mother Nature.

Whether it's fire or flood, blizzard or drought, a blunt reminder every so often from good old Mother has a salutary effect on the perpetually whining denizens of the twentieth century.

This time it was that "cold snap" in January. I like that term. It's a typical Canadian understatement.

And we delight in it, as we do at barn fires, heat spells, terrible thunderstorms, beautiful autumns and three-foot snowfalls. It's peculiarly Canadian, and it makes us all become human again, if only until it's over.

People who normally trudge around with a face like an old rubber boot, people who wouldn't be caught dead in a ditch together, suddenly start shouting witticisms like, "Cold 'nuff fer yeh?!", beaming through dripping noses and purple countenances.

People who wouldn't be caught speaking to each other in the Black Hole of Calcutta find they have a great deal in common: neither could get his car started this morning.

Then there are the braggarts, but we even put up with them, whom we would normally detest, with the greatest of good spirits. They come

in different wrappers. Let's say it's 30 below outside. But there's always some character who lived in Kapuskasing or Yellowknife who swears it was 80 below there all winter, and wasn't even cold, just refreshing. Hacking their lungs out, they say, "This is nothing."

And there's the reverse snob. Through rattling teeth and hunched shoulders, he too claims this is nothing. Why back in '53 it was down to 50 below and stayed there for a week.

Then there's the rugged type. Pounding himself on the chest, he burbles, "This is great; this is the real Canada; this is what makes us a sturdy, independent people." Three days later you get a card from him. From Florida.

Two types are happy, everything is golden, when there is a "cold snap." They are the fuel man and the tow-truck chap. And bully for them, say I.

But my point is that a nature crisis gets people out of themselves, and perhaps it's better than medicine in this neurotic 20th century.

Forgotten during the "cold snap" are the Vietnam war, higher taxes on booze and fags, your rotten boss and the fact that you can't live another week without an automatic dish-washer.

There is a certain joyous drawing to get her against the elements and a definite pride in the fact that you can cope. For once, including Expo,

there is a common bond, as we rub our ears and stamp our feet and blow our noses in a great national chorus that, to me, expresses the real spirit of Canada, and at least temporarily freezes all thoughts of separatism, divorce, a bortion and who's going to be the new Liberal leader.

When you go out in the morning and find that the battery is flat, you don't fuss and cuss. You feel sort of proud that you're taking part in a heroic adventure. You know you're not exactly Scott of the Antarctic, and that you can phone a cab, but you know that all over town, other cars are going, "Argh - argh - arh - ah - uhhh," and it gives you a sense of shared danger and hardship.

There's a tingling and a jingling in the atmosphere. People are grinning and shaking their heads and shouting, "Isn't that a brute of a day?"

And even the domestic problems abate. The other night, it was 28 below zero. My wife is always saying that she might as well leave unless I can "Show some understanding." Kim continually threatens to run away to Vancouver and become a hippie. I opened the door and said "goodbye, chaps." Eighteen seconds later, they were upstairs, watching TV.

Good old Mother N. Once in a while she nudges us back to normal, even though the nudge knocks the wind out of us.

Straight from
the (Soft)
Shoulder

Catch
up!
BY FAYE
COOPER

Well well well! I see the Ontario Law Reform Commission's research team thinks we working wives should help support our families.

Hah! What do they think we're all doing sitting behind these typewriters and manning all these machines all day?

It made me literally splutter, that opening gambit.

All the pent up bitterness against the high cost of living and beef, the low returns from money spent and the incredible double standard we face on the taxation front came foaming out of my mouth in a torrent of pretty well unprintable froth.

Where have they been all these years these redoubtable reformers?

Ten years after the fact they come along wanting to legislate something that's been a working precept for at least that long.

"It's unreasonable" they say "that the law should allow a wife to keep earnings . . . to herself and place on her husband the whole cost of maintaining the family."

Ninety percent of husbands, even in the five-figure earning brackets, can't keep up with rising costs and taxes alone, anyway. So who gets to keep what?

Aren't you and I and the woman down the block all after the same things for our families?

Aren't we all just occupied with trying to keep up with clothes for children who go through the knees of their pants before their ankles show at the bottom. (Or whose ankles show before they even wear the knees?)

Don't we wear ourselves thin trying to keep our homes intact, tidy and attractive for our families, whether alone or with the aid of a cleaning woman?

Don't we bend over backwards making baby-sitting arrangements to maintain our children's safety and security while we're at work?

Don't we have the same goals of family unity, recreation and achievement as our homemaking sisters?

Of course we do! We acknowledge ourselves morally, legally, and spiritually responsible for the welfare of our total family unit.

Go ahead and make a law to that effect if you want, fellows. It's just what's happening already.

THIS WEEK and NEXT Winter works wonders

By Ray Argyle

How to grapple with the blizzards of winter, the sudden storms that can sweep in out of the dull northern sky, is one of the first things Canadians learn.

Native-born Canadians grow up accustomed to shovelling their way out to school and hockey rink. Those who come here from other lands which may have kinder climates soon learn likewise. The men learn how to jockey a car back and forth in a snow bank, and the women learn how to help their husbands keep the lane or driveway clear.

For all that a lifetime can accustom one to winter's tricky ways, however, the fury of the snow storm never becomes entirely a routine thing.

And when the storm is borne on the pellets of

frozen rain, and when ice casts trees and other shivering objects in glistening jackets of frigid cover, the winter blizzard is at once a beautiful and awe-inspiring thing.

Neighbors come together when the snow storms strike. And total strangers become anxious to help one another. It seems to bring everyone together to do battle with and vanquish a common challenge — the menacing and icy hand of winter.

It sometimes seems that winter is not as cold as it used to be. Or the snow so deep, or the ice so early to form on the trickling rivulets of the big city ravines, or the country creeks.

This of course is a myth. It's just that we now spend more time indoors, in cozy shops or

offices, and less time bundled up against the blasts of winter. The dash to the car is indeed a bone-chilling experience, but as nothing compared to the long hikes of youth, in the days when one walked to school and was not driven, as is the case today.

Most grown-up Canadians, despite their allegiance to curling and hockey (the one played in a reasonably warm arena, the other watched on TV in the den or living room) never really come to terms with winter.

These who dwell in the lotus land of coastal British Columbia, for instance, will find their lives reduced to chaos when a fraction of an inch of snow descends on their neighborhood.

There is really only one way to live with the Ca-

nadian winter, and that is to do the things that only winter makes possible. This is to ski, and to curl, and to skate, and to ice fish, and to snowshoe, and to hike through the woods with the crunch of dry, powdered snow passing underfoot.

But few of us do this. It is a seldom seen sight. For all the popularity of the ski slopes and other winter activities, only a minority of Canadians take part.

I think the proud residents of Quebec City perhaps have learned more than any other Canadians how to live with winter. They care not whether the street is plowed or the sidewalk shovelled.

Every member of a Quebec family lives with winter, dresses for it, takes part in it, and seems to thrive on it.

Nearly all of us know the beauty of the snow-still night, which casts a reflection of equal magnitude whether it be a city street or a quiet forest.

The quiet of the Canadian winter — the stillness after the storm — is surely one of the great emotional experiences available in this country. Nature is beautiful in all its manifestations, even when it brings disaster on its wings, and winter is not the less beautiful for its inconveniences.

And so I say be not distressed at the whine of the winter wind. If met on equal terms (and of course this is not always possible) the winds of winter can beckon one to gladden the spirit in the playgrounds of the forest.

And when the winter winds blow, can spring be far behind?