

MY FINAL COLUMN: REFLECTIONS ON WRITING ABOUT BROWNSVILLE

The following article, the last column I wrote for the Herald-Standard, appeared in the May 13, 2006 edition of the newspaper.

On Sunday, October 25, 1998, the Uniontown *Herald-Standard* published my first newspaper column, a story in which I recounted a conversation I had with the late Eugene Townsend of Redstone Township. At the time, the article was an experiment to see whether a newspaper column whose themes were local history and nostalgia might find a niche among the readership of the *Herald-Standard*.

To my and the editor's delight, the readers responded well to the article. That initial effort was followed by 386 more weekly articles written over eight years.

It is therefore with some melancholy that I tell you that this will be my last *Herald-Standard* column for the foreseeable future. I am taking an indefinite leave of absence from writing for the *Herald-Standard* so that I can devote more time to enjoying my family and to pursuing some of my other interests.

Those who know me personally are aware that this past January, I retired from Brownsville Area High School after spending 33½ years teaching teenagers about our nation's and our community's history. You would think that retiring from my full-time job would have freed up plenty of time for me to write for the newspaper and to pursue those other interests. That's what I thought too.

It hasn't turned out that way. Many retired folks claim they are busier in retirement than they were when they were working full time. I didn't believe them when they said that.

I believe them now.

It would be natural to speculate that after eight years of writing about Brownsville's history, I've run out of things to write about. When I started writing this column in 1998, I doubted that I would be able to

think of enough column topics to make it through a few months. As it turns out, I have even more column ideas now than I did when I started writing these articles, thanks in large part to a never-ending stream of suggested topics from my readers.

The real reason that I am stepping away from writing for the newspaper is that even though I retired from my full-time teaching job, the part-time job of writing two weekly newspaper columns is still a weekly commitment, and for at least a while, I wish to be without that deadline. My kids are still of school age and they are home-schooled. This is a time in my family's lives when we have a perfect opportunity to do whatever we want whenever we want, and travel wherever we like for as long as we wish. We will take advantage of year-round educational and travel opportunities without having Dad on a psychological tether to his newspaper responsibilities.

Does this mean I am abandoning my interest in the history of the Brownsville area?

Of course not.

Does it mean I am leaving the pages of the *Herald-Standard* forever?

I don't know.

I am calling my exit an "indefinite leave of absence," which has a potential duration of months, years – who knows? The boss tells me I will be welcomed back any time as long as he is the editor, so I will wish for him many years of journalistic nirvana at the *Herald-Standard*, just in case I decide to take him up on that offer someday.

What will I miss most about writing this column every week? That's easy. I'll miss the colorful local people who have regaled me with stories about the good old days. I'll miss the people all over the United States (and in a few other countries as well) with whom I have exchanged many emails and had many phone conversations over the years, spinning tales about Brownsville's past.

Natives of this area are scattered all over the nation, but Brownsville is still in their blood, no matter how long they have been gone or how far they have roamed. Brownsville expatriates are a great bunch of people, and I feel like they've become my friends over the years. I hope they feel the same.

I've interviewed some fascinating folks in the past eight years, and that has led me to form an opinion about the type of people who are the most interesting to interview. I find that I prefer talking with members of the older generation – the older the better – because those folks are usually unpretentious and as honest as the day is long. They tell it like it is. In the late innings of the game of life, they no longer feel the need to

disguise their feelings or to be politically correct in what they say.

A talk with a senior citizen isn't likely to be a quiet, laid-back, tea-sipping conversation. It will probably be a rip-roaring good time. These veterans of life have seen and had experiences that the rest of us can only try to imagine.

Yet all too often, their bountiful reserve of wisdom, based on years of life experiences, is ignored by the rest of us. We would all be better off if we stopped more often to listen to our oldest citizens express their thoughts about life.

Writing these columns and sharing a few minutes of your weekend mornings with you over the past eight years has been a great experience for me. I enjoy writing, and I expect someday I'll be knocking on the door of the *Herald-Standard*, ready to get back at it again.

But for now, dear readers, I'm hanging up my byline.

To all of you . . . so long.