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THURSDAY | DECEMBER 13, 2018

Remembering George Bush

Not just one of the most rewarding aspects, but the best part of my professional career, now closing in on 45 years, remains the wonderful people I've met as a newspaper reporter and editor. They've compensated me handsomely with insights into their communities, their states and our country.

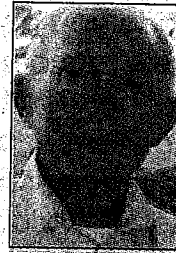
If I said handsome paychecks came with my jobs in the newspaper and tech worlds, call me a liar. Instead, the benefit has come from sincere relationships and terrific human stories, and reporting for the Belgrade News in the past four months has renewed that joy.

As I became better acquainted with a community my wife, son and I have called home since 2009, I've crossed paths with people like Keith Mainwaring, spearheading the Belgrade Bull project; Mary Ellen Fitzgerald and her brother, Dean Miller, who shared stories about the Turkey Red Railroad; Mike Barner, also a Turkey Red aficionado; and a pair of wonderful, helpful people at the Gallatin History Museum in Bozeman, Executive Director Cindy Shearer and research specialist extraordinaire Rachel Phillips.

That's just the tip of the iceberg. I could use up way more space than available to list people who've helped me this time around.

Last week brought back memories of another experience that gave me lifetime memories. That was the extraordinary tribute to George H.W. Bush, first in Washington, D.C., then in Houston and finally in College Station, Texas, where the World War II hero and 41st president was laid to rest next to his beloved wife, Barbara.

My passing connection to Mr. Bush started in May 1980, when I was editor of the weekly Frankenmuth, Michigan, News. Bush, then a candidate for president before Ronald Reagan tapped him to join his ticket as vice-president, made what was believed to be the



REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

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first visit by a presidential candidate to Frankenmuth. It's a gorgeous town with German heritage of about 5,200 people, about a 1-1/2 hour drive north of Detroit.

Bush was stumping for votes in the Michigan primary in late May 1980. His 3-1/2 hours or so in Frankenmuth made a lasting memory for many residents and me. The town has two famed, family-style restaurants that draw diners from hundreds of miles away throughout the Midwest, especially on occasions like Easter and Mother's Day. When I was there, two brothers operated the restaurants in friendly competition; I'm not sure but imagine the businesses have passed on to the next generation.

The brothers, whose last name is Zehnder, were history buffs. So, Eddy ran the Bavarian Inn, which was true to his name, while William "Tiny" operated the Frankenmuth Inn, which has a colonial Williamsport motif.

The Zehnder brothers had a challenge, though. They owned a large parking lot to accommodate their customers on one side of the Cass River, which ran through town, while the restaurants were on the opposite side. One could go to a bridge farther south and get to the commercial district, but these visionary guys had a better idea.

Why not a genuine, wooden covered bridge?

So, in 1979, just before I got to Frankenmuth, they commissioned a New Hampshire guy known as the last

covered bridge builder in America. He built the real deal, complete with wooden spikes instead of nails. He brought in a team of oxen, and they pulled the bridge into place.

Appropriately then, when Bush finished dinner at the Bavarian Inn and took questions from a dozen or so local farmers, he walked across the Frankenmuth Covered Bridge. His entourage included, of course, the Secret Service plus a small crowd of national print and broadcast reporters.

And me. This week, I discovered that the Frankenmuth News has a free digital archive so I was able to pull up a couple stories I wrote about Bush's visit along with my photos that appeared in the paper. They are now priceless memories.

About 12 years later, I saw Bush up close again. Now president, he was campaigning against Bill Clinton in the 1992 election. He came to Billings and spoke at an outdoor rally in Pioneer Park, about two blocks from my house then. A crowd of 8,800 heard him on a glorious Sunday afternoon in October.

Other Gazette reporters handled cov-



Courtesy (we hope)

George Bush appears in Frankenmuth, Mich., in this photo taken by then Frankenmuth News Editor Dennis Gaub.

erage of Bush's visit to Billings; I was just a spectator that day. But the manner of the 41st president's appearance, outdoors and accessible to all (no tickets needed), made a lasting impression on me and I'm sure others who witnessed it.

Borrowing from Jimmy Stewart, "it's a wonderful life." Merry Christmas!