

The Way It Was:

"You know, that Fadness fella is fond of saying that April is the cruelest month. Well, he and Elliott might be right but I tell ya', March is no Mother Theresa either. No sir, March will sneak up the morning after a perfectly beautiful day and rip you a brand new hairdo. Sideways sleet and snow singing a duet with mud up to your shoe tops. That's March for ya'."

I was talking with E. Thomas Holiday, emeritus reporter for the Houston Banner, out at the Shady Rest Manor and Campground near Lanesboro. You may remember his recollections in past columns. He's been around long enough to have observed and then written about pretty near every important event in this area during the last eighty odd years. So when he says keep your eye on March, you'd just better keep your eye on March. I reminded him that it is now April but it didn't seem to matter. He wanted to tell March stories, so tell them he did

He was recalling a March that was so bad, either '23, '27 or '33, he couldn't be certain, that the Town Council was considering cancelling the remainder of the month and moving right ahead to April. "They weren't sure what to do with the left over days so they hatched a plan to bank the extras, earn interest on them, and cash them in for a few additional perfect days at the beginning of October. The Town Council had a visionary aspect to it back then. There was no idea too big for them to consider and nothing escaped their attention. They prided themselves on the fact that their deliberations regularly appeared in the "Oddly Enough" section of the St. Paul Pioneer Press."

Mr. Holiday was covering the Council in those days as well as writing the crime blotter (slow) and the field and pasture section (always busy). He remembers a rough time during the Great Depression when revenues were so scarce that the Council cooked up the idea to issue permits and credits for just about anything you could think of. "In one inspired meeting they instituted the Spit Chit. The idea was much like the carbon credits for polluters these days but on a considerably smaller scale. This was not a fine for spitting on the sidewalk but a license to do so. The potential spitter would pay, in advance, for his anticipated launchings. He'd buy so many

credits which entitled him to so many expecorations. This saved the town of Houston from having to issue summonses, go to court and then collect from offenders who had transgressed against the anti- spitting ordinance. Don't fine the crime, tax it." It should be a source of great pride for all of us that the Houston Town Council, way back in '35, provided the model for the Federal Government's treatment of the tobacco industry. Don't outlaw poison, tax it.

There were dozens of other municipal schemes, some of which worked quite well and others that were doomed from day one. "The 'Cussing Curtailment Initiative of '37 was one such failed idea. The hard times had been dragging on for years at that point and, needless to say, it was mighty easy to find something to cuss about. So the Council targeted a short list of words; I'll leave them to your imagination. But please allow me to cite one by way of example. They legislated that a fine of twenty-five cents would be enforced for the public utterance of the "d---" word. Male or female, old or young, it didn't matter. If you did the crime you paid the fine. Business was brisk for the first day or so and then social discourse took its logical direction. People catch on and adjust. It's natural.

Offenders began to speak in shorthand, code, if you will. "D--- " became darn which became dang which became durn which became duh which became, in the end, simply "d". Everyone knew what you meant by "d" but the legal standing for penalizing the use of it kind of fell apart. When it became clear that, to follow the law, one would have to omit "d" from the children's "a,b,c" song, it was all over.

The Council reached the apex of its creative approach to municipal funding when they proposed that farmers be paid to stop growing certain crops. In those days sorghum ruled, so the plan was called "Molasses Passes". In their wisdom the Council knew that a shorted crop would lead to higher prices and therefore increased revenues and taxes down the road. Unfortunately the proposal was hooted out of consideration by a citizenry who simply could not believe that government would pay out good money to let a fertile field lay fallow." Imagine that.

"But I was talking about March, wasn't I?" Mr. Holiday by now realized that he had digressed quite a distance from the weather. It's true, when you reach the age that E.Thomas has, you come to frequent forks in your mind's

road. So rather than fight the inevitable, he chooses instead, to follow the advice of the great Yogi Berra who said, "When you come to the fork in the road...take it."

"So what'll it be young fella? Do you want me to talk more about nature's vicissitudes or shall I go on about the about the way it was?" You choose, Mr. Holiday, you choose. We're all ears.