



Howard, My Pet Rock

In Howard Payne Colors

Courtesy rock-painting artist Walter Harris

THE IDLE AMERICAN

On Becoming a Year Older...

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

Column #1,109 for Release Week of September 15, 2024, or Later

I have probably made this claim previously, but most friends know that my respect for redundancy has never been more than trivial. So, here I go again, certain that there finally are but two groups of people--those who have egos and admit it and those who likewise have 'em and don't admit it.

I'm in the former group--giddy as a five-year-old with a store-bought birthday cake--buoyed by warm memories of a 60-hour whirlwind of accolades marking my 87th birthday.

It all began with a Magnolia, TX, potluck luncheon thrown by church Primetimers on my birthday "eve-eve." It ended in Brownwood, TX, where I handed officials the game ball to signal the beginning of the Howard Payne University/Hardin-Simmons University football game. (Side note: I made the hand-off without fumbling, and in a flash, my "15 seconds of fame" was over.

Longtime friend Jay Allison, CEO of Comstock Resources in Frisco, also was an honoree, serving as “honorary team captain” for the entirety of the game.)....

First things first: Several months ago, Barbara Harris, a go-getter in Magnolia, invited me to speak to her church Primetimers. I agreed, mentioning that the event would mark the beginning of my 65th year of public speaking, two days prior to my 87th birthday on Sept. 7.

Eureka, thought she. Why not have a birthday party for me and all attendees? This thought led to Pandora’s box opening, and her creative juices--flowing regularly in daylight hours and often in dawn’s early light--overflowed.

There were birthday cakes everywhere, and enough additional table decorations to start a Mardi Gras, stopping just short of bead-throwing. There were 12 tables for persons born from January through December....

Emcee Barbara --who never saw a detail to be overlooked--was in rare form. Someone said she can gab at 250 words a minute--with gusts to 300--while threading the needle of an electric sewing machine with it a’runnin’. I can believe that.

She decided to reveal to the group of some 80 persons how many total birthdays were being observed. First Baptist Church staffer Milt Eichler calculated the cumulative figure to be well north of 5,000. (Yikes, it was sobering to realize that my birthdays contributed nearly 2% of this figure.)

I came home with much, including a birthday cake, an encased 1937 Indian head “birth nickel,” a touching tribute poem penned by her ownself, and a “pet rock” painted by her hubby in school colors of Howard Payne University, where I served as president from 1986-1997....

The Harrises are on track for squeezing the most from retirement years. They have children and grandchildren to enjoy, a church to serve, friends to value and a marriage of 53 years to savor.

These retired educators have a lovely home, where I spent the night prior to speaking. I even got to see their pet turtles--named, of course--muddle around the backyard.

Barbara crowds much into her schedule, including meetings of TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly)--a program that she claims hasn’t worked for her--and a sewing group whose members “mostly keep each other in stitches.” Walter, a high school and HPU track runner, seems to pace himself with home projects and rock painting....

In Brownwood , my team lost. However, I remained on a “sugar high” from intake of birthday cake slabs. Still, I handled my football hand-off duties acceptably, though not in a manner nearly as stately as Allison, who was stoic and dignified throughout the game.

Down deep, he was probably hurting for his Baylor Bears, who lost that weekend, too. Maybe I'll get Harris to paint him a pet rock, too. (Pet rocks, BTW, emerged in 1975.)

There is much to savor, including birthday wishes from several hundred alumni, among whom were two HPU graduates who bought my books. Such discriminating readers are particularly valued....

Dr. Newbury, longtime university president, continues to speak and write. The Idle American, begun in 2003, is one of the nation's longest-running syndicated humor columns. Contact: 817-447-3872. Email: newbury@speakerdoc.com. Website: www.speakerdoc.com.