

THE IDLE AMERICAN

Spell Check Runs Amok....

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

Column #1,124 for Release Week of December 30, 2024, or Later

“Spell Check” -- first thought to be a handy computer feature to help us use the correct letters in the proper order for word formation--often goes haywire.

Like oft-discussed Artificial Intelligence (AI is the abbreviation, despite my thinking it to be short for “Alfred” in the early going), it can be dead wrong, redden faces and run far afield from what is intended.

This may be true when the name of our current hometown--Burleson, TX, where we have domiciled in semi-retirement since 2002--is typed....

Burleson had hardly gotten the “sleepy” rubbed from its eyes when we moved into our modest tract home on a cul-de-sac near Interstate Highway 35W. Longtime residents at the time bragged about the community’s immense growth, its population reaching 20,000 shortly before the turn of the century.

Old-timers rattled on about memories of one traffic light, a couple of eating places and it being the “crepe myrtle capital” of Texas. Many comments seemed trivial, usually trailing off to other topics like

grandchildren and the weather. (Similarly, Brownwood, TX, where I grew up, once was known as “the feather duster capital of the world,” to which millions of deceased turkeys might attest.)

Over the past two decades, though, there’ve been interesting--or at least, semi-interesting--facts surfacing long enough to pique interest about Burleson, now wide awake....

Interestingly (and most sentences beginning with this word aren’t), our town is named for a university president, Dr. Rufus Columbus Burleson.

Not only was the late educator a president, he took on the task twice -- 25 years apart--at Baylor University, which was chartered by the State of Texas in 1845. (BU almost moved to Dallas in 1929, but in that initial year of the Great Depression, most everything huddled in place.)

That a man would serve in this role for a decade (1851-1861) and be asked to return in 1886 for 11 more years defies both probability and imagination.....

I have digressed shamelessly. Research entices with “rabbit trails,” many of which I traverse gleefully. Initially, I was addressing spell check.

But wait. There is a connection. Often when I type the word “Burleson,” spell check suggests that my intent

might have been to type “burlesque.” It even offers to make the correction for me with the click of a key.

Burleson was a good ten miles from any known sin at the time of its founding in 1912....

Fact is, there were only a few hundred people to sin and/or walk the straight and narrow at the time. Humbly begun, Burleson was but a stop on the Interurban (tram-like electrical rail cars) that ran 10 times daily between Fort Worth and Cleburne.

Henry Renfro, a visionary who owned much land and cut a wide swath politically, wanted to honor the man who had been his teacher, then president, at Baylor.

Thus Burleson was born, even if spell check doesn't cotton to the choice.....

We'll never know for sure, of course, whether Dr. Burleson cared to have his name on a city limits sign. He might have wished his middle name—Columbus--had been chosen. But, another community had chosen that historic name a half-century earlier.

“Rufus” doesn't set well, either.

Neither do “Rufusville,” “Rufusburg” or perhaps “Crepe Myrtleville”. We can only guess how spell check might have mangled these....

Burleson has grown threefold, now around 60,000, since our arrival, with no end in sight. (Proximity to Fort

Worth--now ahead of Austin as Texas' fourth-largest city--helps.)

Our family name identifies buildings at Howard Payne University in Brownwood, TX, where I graduated in 1961 and served as president, 1986-1997.

A couple of dozen students gathered for the naming of Newbury Place Apartments, claiming it to be an historic day. "Now they'll know where to deliver the pizza," one student bragged, seemingly relieved....

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.