

SAGA OF A MOWER AND OF WANING POWER

By J B Leftwich

Hanging on the wall of my office is a 16x20 picture I made of a storage building located on our family farm in Rock Springs Valley of Putnam County. Positioned in front of the building is a horse-drawn hay mower abandoned decades ago as motorized farm machinery evolved.

When the new mowing machine was purchased, perhaps 90 years ago, it was a state-of-the-art addition to our farm machinery, a conversation piece that interested not only our family but other farmers in our rural community.

I remember with a bit of nostalgia the posterior blisters created by the seat of the mower as I rode it over rough terrain while mowing hay on our hillside farm. At the time, I would have welcomed the developing technology which rendered obsolete our mower and harvested hay in huge rolls transported by hydraulic lift tractors.

The mowing machine was doomed to obsolescence from the day it arrived. Just as the hand-cranked telephone, the horse and buggy and the old wet battery radio which were the mower's contemporaries.

My thoughts dwelt on the old machine this week as I thought of Sam Swindle and Tommy Waggoner, my friends at Swindle's clothing store which is going out of business because it too is a victim of changing patterns and lifestyle.

When I came to Lebanon in 1937, the building which houses Sam's store was occupied by McClain and Smith, an excellent store for men's clothing. One of its competitors was Askew's, operated by Robert Askew who sold his business to my friend John Hatcher, former manager of the Princess and Capitol theaters which no longer exist.

These businesses became obsolescent on the square as the city grew, shopping centers proliferated and buying habits changed. Of the many businesses on the Square when I arrived on the scene, only Seat's Studio, now operated by the third generation of the Seat family, remains in business.

Just as business and professional enterprises obsolesce, so do the people who operate them fade from the scene. Some of us do not go gracefully.

At the annual meeting of the Castle Heights Military Academy alumni last month, I talked with an old friend and former student who is a retired successful attorney and circuit judge.

"Judge," I asked, "You have occupied positions of power and respect -- actually of awe. You have been an absolute power in your own fiefdom. Do you miss the respect and honor accorded you in your courtroom?"

There was a moment of silence while the former judge contemplated my question. At last, he replied.

“I do,” he said.

Just as I, he has been assaulted by various infirmities forcing him to withdraw from the mainstream. There was a void in his life, a vacuum formerly filled with bustling activities of attorneys, juries, complainants and defendants. He was the arbiter of the energetic flow of a rapid stream. Now he is in the eddy, an observer rather than a participant.

I, too, observe. And as the passing years accelerate and new people emerge to become shakers and doers, I drift in the eddy somewhat a prisoner of a hearing deficiency, wondering how it would be to compete full time in today’s activity.

One of the abysses lurking for retirees is anonymity, which envelops us as we become less active in a community. That is one reason I rue the passing of Sam Swindle’s clothing store. When I walked into Swindle’s, I was recognized. No ID, no credit card, no questions, no credit requirements. Just buy what I want, charge it and walk out. There was a day when I could exercise this privilege in any store in Lebanon.

I wonder about former U. S. presidents. How do they manage their pride and ego when they surrender the most powerful position on the planet, see their pictures rarely in the newspapers and on television, and contemplate the upstart newcomer who now presides over the greatest concentration of power on the globe?

Men -- and now women -- covet that power and recognition. Religion and the struggle for power are center stage in the world conflict that besets us now. Religion is a vehicle of power in Christianity and in Islam. My son believes the current turmoil is just another chapter in the Crusades. He may be right.

But Osama and Saddam and George W. will fade from the scene. Just as the judge did, and President Reagan and President Ford and chairmen of the boards of powerful companies.

And Swindle’s store.

And the horse-drawn mower.

(J.B. Leftwich is a veteran journalist and a columnist for *The Lebanon Democrat*.
Email: leftwichjb@charter.net)

<http://www.ajlambert.com>