

AN EX-NAVIGATOR'S LAMENT

Recently, I was driving around in central New Jersey with my son, Erik. He was giving me routing directions, which were accurate – but it bothered me that I hadn't a clue as to our whereabouts, or the location of some places in relation to other places, or which highways connect certain towns.

A vision from almost six decades ago flashed before my eyes – Ensign Jim Freund on a U.S. Navy icebreaker, perched over a large chart showing the waters around Point Barrow, Alaska. Call it a flight of fancy, but in my remembered version, the ship, its captain and crew, and our mission were all dependent on my determination, as the vessel's navigator, as to where we were at that juncture and what course we should steer to our destination

I turned to face my son. "What I need, Erik, is a map – a good old-fashioned paper map of the State of New Jersey." Erik, his tone duly solicitous, assured me that Google (or whatever other digital plaything inhabited his cellphone) could handle the task. But I felt the need for something I could unfold, spread out, and annotate with my pen.

"No offense," I said – "but let's stop at the next gas station, and I'll buy a road map."

Erik shrugged his shoulders – a gesture I later determined to be a warning along the lines of, "You may be in for a shock, Dad." Ignoring any such premonition, I pulled the car into the next gas station we passed that had a shopping mart.

Once inside, I knew we were in the right place – it was the equivalent of a modest supermarket, while also featuring a lot of automotive gear. At my approach, the man behind the counter voiced a friendly welcome.

"Please tell me where you keep the maps," I asked.

"The what?" he replied, looking genuinely uncertain of what I was seeking.

“The maps – the road maps of New Jersey – you know, Rand McNally and all that.”

“Oh,” he responded, less puzzled now that he understand what I was after. “I’m sorry, we don’t carry road maps.”

“You don’t?” I asked, incredulity etched in my voicing. “A gas station that’s here to service drivers, and you don’t have a road map to let them see where they’re going?”

“No, I don’t – although I do have some picture postcards over in the third aisle”

“Come on, Erik,” I said, my voice dripping with disdain – “we’ve obviously chosen the wrong place to shop.”

Well, I won’t prolong the agony much longer. We stopped at three more gas stations. Two had no road maps at all. One had a few stuck in a dusty corner, but they were of locations in Pennsylvania, bearing 20th century dates. (Obviously, the New Jersey maps had been sold a decade or two ago and never replaced, while the Pennsylvania ones, having failed to attract buyers, were never thrown out.)

“This is ridiculous,” I said when we were back in the car. “Let’s go to a mart that has everything – a big CVS-type drug store.” And we did, but they didn’t. Nor did a huge supermarket. Maybe if there had been a Barnes & Noble in the neighborhood, we might have scored, but none was even on the horizon. And those map-laden super-highway truck stops were a long way off.

I became resigned to my fate – only saved from total despair by my thoughtful son who, witnessing my agitation, came up with this palliative: “Oh, Dad, “I remember when I was 18, going away to college out west, and you bought me my first car. As I left, you gave me a 40-page Rand McNally Atlas, with maps of every city and state – it was my bible for a dozen years.” What a kid

Anyway, the experience got me thinking. Obviously, the need for paper road maps has been obviated in recent years by the driving instructions and such available on GPS devices in cars and on computers, pads and cell phones. How many other items, I wondered, that a decade or two ago were readily available, are in scant supply nowadays – due to technology, or a change in people’s desires or tastes, or whatever. And I’ve been posing that question to family members and friends ever since.

Everybody has examples to contribute. The victims of advanced technology are legion: cassettes(video and audio) and those little Walkman-type players we swore by, manual typewriters (to which I invariably reply, “and how about carbon paper?”); cameras that use film and the requisite film rolls. One of my friends longed for television sets where, ignoring the present-day complex remotes, he could turn the power on by pressing a single button on the chassis (to which I added, “and how about rabbit-ears antennae?”).

Can you find any tire chains that used to help your car endure bad weather (although they were tough to put on)? And what ever happened to inner tubes? Or automotive carburetors? While shopping for my latest new car, the salesman never even bothered to open the hood to extol what powered the vehicle – not that I ever grasped the full measure of what was invariably displayed in the old days – but devoted his entire pitch to the electronics in and around the dashboard.

My cousin Judy, who actually lives in New Jersey and can find her way around, took my plaint to heart and came up with something new on a daily basis – coin phone booths, phone books, desk blotters, the little adhesive corners that were used to position prints in a photo album, you name it.

What if I wanted to send someone a good old-fashioned congratulatory telegram today – how would I go about it? My son reminded me of a pill called Alka Two that I used to tout for anything relating to indigestion – and of the time it failed to ward off a case of childhood appendicitis.

I've got one for you. Remember those extra-long shorts that used to cover Rafael Nadal's knees when he first burst on the scene and cleaned everyone's clock at the French Open? Try to get one of those today You can't? Well, I still have a pair – only Barbara won't let me wear them when company's around.

Everyone has a food candidate. Walk into a Chinese restaurant today and try to order chow mein, chop suey and egg foo yong (the staples of what passed for Cantonese cooking in my youth). Someone bemoaned the scarcity of a good charlotte russe – sponge cake, ice cream and a cherry on top. Yes, Virginia, there's a definite shortage of Beef Wellington. And for one of my friends, the passage of Teaberry's clove gum is depressing. I liked banana cream pie and frog legs but don't see them on too many menus today – and where are those Longchamps restaurants my family splurged at on special occasions?. My mother, in her advanced years, searched in vain for crabmeat au gratin. And what about that nonpareil sandwich, formerly available at any Chock Full 'O Nuts – cream cheese on datenut bread?

I don't know if this one counts, but when I got married the first time, while still in law school, we had very little money. I can vividly recall on a trip to the food market asking the butcher, "What's the cheapest cut of meat you sell?" I picture him surveying the multiple offerings for a few moments before replying with absolute certainty, "Lamb liver". We bought it and, yes, it was terrible. So last week, when I was in a big supermarket with all the meats laid out on the counter, I looked (in vain) for lamb liver

Enough of my personal nostalgia. Here's your assignment – come up with some stuff that fits this "not-available" pattern and will get us all reminiscing about the good old days.

As for me, after descending to the depths, today I'm in heaven. My cousin Judy located an obscure AAA office in a small New Jersey town near her home, where she purchased and sent to me a great big map of the state. As we speak, I've laid it out on the kitchen table and am busily drawing little circles around Bernardsville, Hackettstown, East Windsor