

1. the glorious fourth

Last year's Lake Wobegon Fourth of July (Delivery Day) was glory itself, sunny and not too hot, flags flying, drummers drumming, scores of high-stepping horses, smart marching units in perfect cadence, and Ben Franklin, Sacajawea, Ulysses S. Grant, Babe Ruth, Amelia Earhart, and Elvis marching arm in arm along with Miss Liberty majestic in seven-pointed crown and wielding her torch like a big fat baton, plus the Leaping Lutherans parachute team, the Betsy Ross Blanket Toss, a battery of cannons belching flame boomboomboom from the crest of Adams Hill and Paul Revere galloping into town to cry out the news that these States are now Independent, God Bless Us All, and Much Much More, all in all a beautiful occasion in honor of America, and the only sour note was that so few in Lake Wobegon appreciated how truly glorious it all was, since Wobegonians as a rule consider it bad luck to be joyful, no matter what Scripture might say on the subject, and so in the swirl of color and music and costumes and grandeur you could

hear people complain about the high cost of gasoline and shortage of rainfall and what in God's Name were they going to do with the leftover food. It was all eaten, that's what was done. More than seventeen thousand people attended and downed 800 pounds of frankfurters, 1800 of ground beef, a half-ton of deep-fried cheese curds, 500 gallons of potato salad, a tanker-truckload of Wendy's beer, but the next day the talk in the Chatterbox Cafe was not about exultation and the wonders of the great day, no, it was about the bright lipstick someone smeared on the stone face of the statue of the Unknown Norwegian and the word *RATS!* painted on walls and sidewalks and the innerspring mattress dumped on the lawn of Mr. and Mrs. Bakke, the work of persons unknown. People grumped about vandals and what made them do the bad things they do (lack of parental discipline, short attention spans) and maybe it's time to rethink the Fourth of July and pull in our sails a little and not give bad apples an arena for their shenanigans.

The Chairman, Clint Bunsen, was unfazed by this, having grown up with these people, and he weathered the petty complaints and dispatched his men to pick up the mattress and clean up the graffiti, and by the time March rolled around and the snow melted he was all set to go again and giving The Speech which the Old Regulars knew almost by heart and which went something like this: "July Fourth is the birthday of our country and deserves to be done right because, by God, it is a great country and it changed the world and if we can't even find a way to say that, then who are we? A bunch of

skunks, that's who. When you neglect the details, you lose the big picture. For want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe the horse was lost, and so forth. Like my father said, personal slovenliness is the doorway to cowardice and cruelty. Nobody cares about holidays anymore. Which is why—and I'm only giving my opinion here—the country is so beset by government lies and corruption and everybody out for himself and to hell with the future—because those people grew up thinking the Fourth was just a day to lie around on the beach and toast your weenie.”

Chairman Bunsen loved the Fourth, he relished it, the booming, the chatter, the smell of cooking fires, the gaudiness, the good humor, the fiery delectations bursting in the sky, and he was happy to expand on this if you questioned the lavishness of it—Why two drum-and-bugle corps? Couldn't we cut back on the fireworks? Does it really take sixteen Percherons to pull one circus wagon? And why four wagons? Wouldn't two be sufficient? Why \$1,200 for the Leaping Lutherans Parachute Team—wouldn't they appear gratis? Had he asked? Did we need to bring the Grand Forks Pitchfork Drill Team in? Couldn't we have found something just as good in Minnesota?—and he got very quiet and then started in on the subject of Getting The Details Right. “There was the guy who neglected to check his oil and the car overheated on the way to his girlfriend's and he was an hour late and she refused to date him again and if he had seen to business she probably would have married him instead of me. And I wouldn't be here. I'd be living it up in California. All because of lubrication.” He

cackled at his own story, nobody else did.

Clint Bunsen along with his brother Clarence ran Bunsen Motors on Main Street, the Ford garage in town, he was the ginger-haired, snub-nosed man in dungarees, and when he got wound up about the Fourth the O.R.s looked deeply into their coffee cups and listened.

The O.R.s were Carl, Lyle, Ernie, Berge, LeRoy, and Billy P., somber men with big rumps and great bellies that cried out for a pin-striped vest and a silver watchchain to accent the amplitude, and they sat in the corner booth at the Chatterbox and shot the breeze and bitched about their aching backs and their wandering children, but when spring came the Chairman climbed up on his high horse about the Fourth.

In other towns the Fourth was a parade of tractors and pickups led by a geezer VFW honor guard with four old ladies in a convertible, some dogs riding in a pickup, and a kid carrying a boom box playing "The Stars And Stripes Forever," but the Chairman insisted on upholding high standards despite all the guff he got. "It is not easy trying to sell grandeur and pizzazz to a bunch of sour old pragmatists," he said.

Last year's Fourth of July was G-L-O-R-I-O-U-S and the Old Regulars were his right-hand men who saw to the details. It was maybe no Latin Carnival with ecstatic dancing in the streets and men waving their shirts over their heads, but it was terrific in its own way. Absolutely amazing. Nothing else like it. Lake Wobegon's Fourth had not one but two national champion drum-and-bugle corps snap-bang-rattle-boombooming down Main Street, one of them in leather kilts, the Fabulous

Frisbee Dogs of Fergus Falls, a unicycle basketball team whipping a ball around as they wheeled through fancy formations, a line of girls in illuminated glow-worm outfits, a dazzling float made of silver candy wrappers with a clown who juggled tabby cats, a fire-eater who blew flames fourteen feet long, local men and women dressed up as George and Martha, Abe Lincoln, Tom Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, Susan B. Anthony, Grant Wood's *American Gothic* couple, Uncle Sam on stilts, and four antique circus bandwagons with fantastic carved figures and bands seated atop them blazing away on "Muskrat Ramble" and "When The Saints Go Marching In"—pulled by Percherons, sixteen-horse hitchers that took your breath away—plus the precision pitchfork drill team and the Betsy Ross Blanket Toss—ten Minutemen in powdered wigs and knee breeches holding a canvas net and throwing a woman wrapped in Old Glory thirty feet into the air, the Jubilation Marching Handbell Choir of Holdingford, forty white-gloved ladies, a bell in each hand, playing a rousing "Ode To Joy" as they strode along—and much more—contests, the Living Flag, yowsa yowsa yowsa, a magnificent fireworks display climaxing in a thunderous seven-rocket burst that spelled out W-O-B-E-G-O-N in the sky—and moments later, as an extra bonus, a fabulous thunderstorm. The Cable News Network sent a camera crew from Chicago—at Clint's invitation—people said, "Oh why would they bother covering a parade in Lake Wobegon?" and Clint said, "It can't hurt to ask"—and that Fourth of July night CNN broadcast it and the next day it was shown internationally and, all in all, it got 57 million viewers.

Fifty-seven million. Okay, so it was only forty-five seconds long, but that's not bad, and yes, CNN failed to identify the town by name so it might as well have been Peabody Junction or Grovers Corners or Big Butt, Wisconsin, but nevertheless.

Not so shabby for a town of 2,182 out in the hinterlands. Central Minnesota: hardly a focal point of American culture. Hog farms, soybeans, long Lutheran sermons, hard winters, and a steady exodus of young people heading south and southwest. Only time you ever see Minnesota on national TV is if people perish in a blizzard or if a very polite young man goes off and murders six old schoolteachers in a van. You would think that the smart fellow who can get millions of people to look at Lake Wobegon on a festive day in summer, his colleagues on the Fourth of July Committee would say, "You have exceeded our every expectation, Clint. You have brought glory to our town. The children of Lake Wobegon bless you."

Fourteen speaking invitations from community groups in Osakis, Melrose, Little Falls, Brainerd, etc., etc. *Fourteen!* People who recognized his achievement.

It was a coup. You'd think maybe they would've put his name on a bronze plaque or name a sandwich after him or give him a trophy with seraphim holding up a golden harp, or something. In Paris, Karachi, Berlin, Mumbai, Kyoto, Moscow, Swaziland, Rio, Jakarta, Jerusalem, Madrid, Acapulco, and Abu Dhabi, images of the Sons of Knute and the statue of the Unknown Norwegian and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery and Mayor Eloise Krebsbach saying, "The Fourth of July is a time when we all come together as one community."

Ha! What a joke. What it did was tear people apart.

Success was the problem. You bring forth a triumph and people (1) resent you for it, (2) expect you to do it again, except better, (3) watch for signs of pride on your part, and (4) await your debacle with cheerful anticipation.

About one third of the town thought—Hey, great. Fifty-seven million people. You put us on the map. Congratulations to all who worked so hard and let's build on their success and do even better next year.

And a third said—It was okay. It could've been worse. But it could've been done for half the cost and without alienating so many people by excluding them from participation. Let's make a Fourth that we can all take part in.

And the third third said—The Fourth of July has gotten completely out of control. National TV exposure has gone to our heads. In our lust for the spotlight, we have forgotten who we are and we are attracting to this community an element of people who you've got no idea who they are. We never used to lock our doors at night and now we do. They could come in here late at night with pliers and a screwdriver and take anything they want.

And at the very next Committee meeting, Viola Tors lit into him and said, "Why did CNN not identify our town? Nobody said 'Lake Wobegon.' No name on the screen. Who dropped the ball there? And why did they not refer to Delivery Day? And why was the four-minute silence completely overlooked?"¹

¹ 1 The Fourth of July was known to some older residents as Delivery Day, commemorating Lake Wobegon's miraculous survival of the

She looked straight at Clint as she said it. He replied that he was not the TV director and that probably they didn't call it Delivery Day because it'd take too long to explain about the bowling balls falling from the sky like artillery shells and in

Great Tornado of July 4, 1965—to the north and west, several towns got whacked hard, water towers and grain elevators leveled, trailers blown away, but Lake Wobegon emerged with little damage. It was a sunny day in town—the storms were fifty miles to the northwest—but debris was carried by high-altitude winds from the storm front, and out of a clear blue sky a barn door came flying in, whirling like a top, and sliced off the attic of the Irv Peterson house as the family sat in the dining room, eating rhubarb crumble. A 1957 Chevrolet the tornado picked up from behind Helen's Hi-Top Lounge in Fergus Falls fell to earth in the garden of the Earl Dickmeiers, missing their house crowded with grandchildren, by inches, judging by the fact that the TV antenna from the roof was found impaled in the car's left rear tire. The spot in the garden where the car hit was the rhubarb patch. And a wooden crate containing thirty-six bowling balls lifted off from the Breckenridge train depot, flew for miles, split open, and rained bowling balls down on Lake Wobegon—some splintered, some embedded themselves in soft ground, one bounced on the loading dock behind Ralph's Grocery, flew a hundred feet in the air, bounced on Main Street, and landed on the roof of the Sidetrack Tap—there was no warning at all, just small objects in the sky suddenly getting larger, and none of them touched a soul, though the town was packed with people. And so every year, the Catholic Knights of the Golden Nimbus marched under a banner

UNITED TOGETHER

BY GOD'S MERCY

JULY 4, 1965

and carried the hood of that 1957 Chevrolet and a green bowling ball, and people stood in silence as they passed. And then at the time of the bombardment, 4:36 p.m., the entire town observed four minutes of silence in gratitude for God's mercy.

the end people wouldn't believe it anyway so what's the point? She just harrumphed and said that he ought to listen to his own speech about taking care of details. That was Viola. A kill-joy. She had a terrier who was just like her, a headache of a dog who liked to hector other dogs. Every yard was Booji's territory and he bristled at the very existence of other dogs. He was a barker from the word go. Like him, Viola had discovered the usefulness of belligerence. In this town, people tend to back down if you bristle at them. They don't want to tussle.

She tapped a pencil on her big front teeth and shook her little curly head and rolled her blue eyes as if he were the dumbest boy in the third grade. She wanted more community involvement, public hearings, more transparency, a poll, an environmental impact study—"You go around with all these wonderful ideas in your head—how about sharing with the rest of us?" she told him, which sounded reasonable unless you knew Viola.

She was a killer of wonderful ideas and like so many murderers she used procedure as a weapon. File your wonderful idea with me and in seven (7) days I will show you ten (10) reasons why it can't be done.

"I should think you'd've at least made sure they mentioned Delivery Day," she said. "You can't let these people run roughshod over you just because they're from New York. You have to speak up. Have a little gumption. If you can't handle these details, maybe we need to get you some help." She had been steamed at him for a year and three months. It was a Friday afternoon, he remembered it well. He walked into her office,

her back was to the door, and she was saying, "Oh, pussy willow, I can't wait to see you. Three hours. I'm counting the minutes, pussy love." And the floorboard squeaked and she jumped and hung up the phone and said, "Why are you spying on me?" She'd been pissed ever since.