

Springhouse Ink

As I write this on Friday, March 13, the President has just minutes ago declared a national state of emergency due to the COVID-19 virus and 18 hours from now I am to lead a River-to-River Trail Society hike from Williams Hill to Beech and Sally hollows. Both of these issues fill me with dread because I don't feel that I am ready to get sick or die.

Ordinarily, a hike is beneficial for health, but I don't think Saturday's will be of much benefit because the National Weather Service is calling for temperatures between 40 and 43 degrees, 100 percent chance of rain and winds between 10 and 13 mph with gusts up to 20 mph. That is the kind of weather that hobbles the most seasoned of outdoorsmen with hypothermia. Temperatures of 20 degrees and snow would be preferable, because snow doesn't seem to soak through the layers and up through shoe soles the way cold rain does. By the time this reaches readers, the outcome of the hike will be a distant memory. Either nobody will show up to hike with me or we'll be a bunch of shivering wet rats facing greater existential threats than those posed by coronavirus. If wise heads prevail and no one meets me at the trailhead, then the remainder of the weekend can be spent thinking about the implication of the national state of emergency.

For the past few days people have been stocking up on what they consider to be the essentials — toilet paper and disinfectant chemicals. All Kentucky schools are cancelled beginning Monday through March 30. This affects me because my wife is a Kentucky school teacher and will be getting an extra long spring break, possibly an extra short summer break. My stepson's classes at University of Illinois are likewise cancelled with an option for online instruction, as are Southeastern Illinois College, John A. Logan College, Southern Illinois University and no doubt many more. NCAA March Madness basketball that entertains many during this final stretch of winter is cancelled. Event organizers are having to talk seriously about going forward with any large gatherings. The situation seems to be changing by the hour rather than the day and none of us can predict the reality a month or a year from now.

The introverts among us may breathe a sigh of relief. (My train of thought was interrupted by a phone call from a funeral director wanting to publish an obituary

in the Harrisburg newspaper. I informed him I have not worked for that publication for the past five years. This event does not ease the sense of dread that I mentioned in the first paragraph of this column.)

The introverts may feel relief because now they have a legitimate excuse for not attending social gatherings. During this period of pandemic they don't have to worry about others mistaking social anxiety for rudeness.

We are advised not to shake hands, but to use an elbow bump — no, not to their heads, to their forearms.

We are advised not to hug. No more having to press chests against those we hardly know, nervous about rancid breath, worrying about forced smiles twisting into bitter grimaces, ensnaring our hands in curls, making small talk while strands of hair ripped by the roots from their scalps dangle from the hangnails at our fingertips. We weren't all raised to be huggers.

When in a group crossing a creek, I guess we let those struggling just fall in the water. When they pull themselves dripping to the other side we'll be waiting with our elbows ready — ready protecting our eyes from the pointy ends of their walking sticks.

Maybe it's best not to listen to that much reporting on the coronavirus. Is the day made better knowing what I heard this morning, that the virus can remain alive on metal and plastic for up to 72 hours? Can I concentrate on my work knowing while it's important to wash hands that the disease is more commonly contracted by inhaling the same air than an infected person has recently exhaled, and that the infected person might not even be in that area anymore but their infected vapor cloud might be, and that surgical masks only prevent spit from coming out of the mouths of the infected and do nothing for those doing the inhaling? Some of these tidbits don't help me much when I'm planning my day.

We are instructed to engage in "social distancing." Introverts, rejoice! Finally, society must not only accept our antisocial ways, but model them. No more flop sweat. No more blood pressure spikes when words like "socialist" and "stock market" and "fascist" and "oligarchy" and "totalitarian" and "environmental protection agency" are introduced into casual conversation. No more saying you need to step outside for a cigarette when you don't even smoke and hope nobody catches you not smoking. Just give them an

elbow to the jaw, say “Sorry, need some Purell,” and step away.

This just in: Illinois public schools are now closed through March 30. Aside from spring break, instruction will be online.

I asked an Illinois teacher in a phone call, “What happens to kids who can’t access the Internet? Do you count them absent?”

“That’s the rub. I don’t know,” he said.

His daughter is a librarian. She anticipates libraries will become day care centers for parents who can’t afford the traditional ones. If the kids sit and read books, then that’s a wonderful outcome. If they treat the library as a rumpus room, then all library patrons may get a glimpse into the routine of the school teacher.

Habits must change. No more spitting on hands and shaking to seal the deal. Blood oaths are absolutely out, for now. Social distancing is in and here are some ideas for this time of year.

Go out to a meadow at dusk and listen to the woodcocks peent. They are peenting away in our neighborhood. “Peent... peent... peent... wheedle, wheedle, wheedle, wheedle — boop, beep, blop, boop, beep, blop,” ad infinitum.

Walk through the woods, look for daffodils and imagine the how the people who planted them lived. It had to be hard, but they got to hear the whippoorwills and enjoy the wildflowers and daffodils.

The creeks are running well and the waterfalls are dramatic. Don’t get your vehicle stuck up.

Chorus frogs, leopard frogs and spring peepers are calling. Coyotes are making weirder noises than usual. On March 8 back when the sky was clear, the air was warm and the moon cast shadows the regular coyotes provided a rough harmony while a soprano among them yowled a melody.

Mullein plants are growing along the ditches. Their fuzzy leaves are nature’s toilet paper. When your stock of back issues, fast food napkins and coffee filters run out, mullein is there to the rescue.

Pick daffodils and put them in a vase. It makes your kitchen prettier.

In this issue John Dunphy informs us about the Wood River Massacre and contributions of some of the surviving family members in “The Moores of Madison County: A Pioneer and Civil War Saga.”

Janie Duffee talks about her love for monarch butterflies in “The Magic of Monarchs.” She raises them in her home! And you can, too, if you do a little homework. This migrating insect decorates our woodlands and meadows with orange and black and could use as much help as we can offer. Keep their milkweed growing.

Mark Motsinger shares some history of the oil pipeline that passes through Norris City in “Historical Marker Observes Norris City’s WWII Contribution.” This White County village played a large role in the

eastern United State’s infrastructure and a new marker erected by the Illinois Historical Society recognizes that role.

“Dixie Departs Teapot Cottage” involves a conversation with longtime recipe contributor Dixie Terry and her contribution to southern Illinois living. She has moved, downsized and made life a little more manageable. Dixie has contributed “From My Kitchen Window” to Springhouse since the second issue and in this column gives us ideas to brainstorm while preparing for the holidays.

“Little Grassy Hatches Little Catfish” explores the reason why Little Grassy Fish Hatchery hatches little catfish. We were surprised by the reason. You may be, too, or you might have known all along. Either way, we enjoyed visiting their facilities near Giant City State Park last September. April and May is the best time to visit, though. Tours are free.

This issue concludes the diaries of Aaron Riley Lambert, the beleaguered Hardin County native who pursued golden riches in California in the 1850s. He wrote five diaries. This is the third and final we can print, because — as he pointed out in the last one — someone broke in and stole the others. Maybe they are still being passed around and entertaining residents of the West Coast. We doubt it, but if anyone stumbles across them at the thrift store please mail them our way. We will pay the shipping cost. There is more to Lambert’s story that we are missing.

Mark Motsinger and friends stumbled across some unexpected imagery in stone at Hogg Bluff in Johnson County. Are they Indian handiwork or done by modern fingers? Maybe an answer will one day be agreed upon, but, until then, the question remains “By Whose Hand?”

Roger K. Lyons pens “The Waterfall of Twenty Thousand Wings” that relates an experience many of us have experienced during fall or winter when a yard full of blackbirds explodes into or from our yard.

Gary DeNeal’s “Bliss-syllabic aka Heavy Reading Ain’t for Wimps” is a poem about a great big book so full of tales it takes a toll on the man who bears it.

“Friends” is a memorial to folks Gary DeNeal and Charles Hammond met during the 1970s while contributing to Dan Malkovich’s *Outdoor Illinois* and *Illinois Magazine*. We intend to run these portraits and brief biographies until we have exhausted them, and then hope to use yours.

“Pond Rings” rounds out this issue. Maybe in this time of flux when social gatherings become morally suspect we all ought to sit down and draw things. Or pick up a musical instrument. Or color a coloring book or take up video gaming or read hard books. Pick a daffodil. Plant a garden, see what grows.

Carpe praesidium. Take cover.

The adventure continues.