



Caption

The View From Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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“Steady at the Helm”

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After nine days roaming the Adirondacks, northern Vermont and New Hampshire, and coastal Maine in a rented RV with my sweetheart, I returned to the *Advertiser* office to find several books piled atop my in-basket. One of the perks of writing for the world's best hometown newspaper is receiving books from local authors who would love (and deserve, in most instances) some exposure for their well-wrought words. I've had the privilege of reading dozens of self-published novels, memoirs, poetry collections and non-fiction works that I'm sure would have escaped my attention otherwise. I hope I've helped sell a copy or two at the Bookworm.

In the batch that had accumulated since we left the 14052 for parts East were seven books. Six of them made up two sets the Joe Gaspé spy trilogy by my friend, the late Richard Minich, who left us in the prime of his writing life. You may recall Richard as the laconic but knowledgeable and helpful associate at Valu, but before each shift there he would spend several hours at his writing craft. The trilogy, *Fireships and Brimstone*, *Girls Before Swine* and *Dread Upon the Water*, follows the adventures of Gaspé, who is both a skilled Great Lakes muskellunge fisherman and a Department of Homeland Security operative along the U.S.A.'s porous, watery border with Canada. Richard's widow, Joan, hopes to have her husband remembered through his writing. Anyone who would like a set of the trilogy, free of charge, is welcome to stop at the *Advertiser*.

The seventh book came from my high school friend, Steve Hatch, former townie whose peripatetic life since leaving East Aurora in the '80s has taken him and his wife Laurie Thorpe Hatch to Tennessee, Texas, Florida and now South Carolina. The book, *Levon: From Down in the*

Delta to the Birth of the Band and Beyond by Sandra Tooze, promises to be an enjoyable read about The Band's iconic drummer, the late Levon Helm, whom we both admired. Included with *Levon* was a note to me and a photocopy of a letter to the editor he had sent to *The Advertiser* in March of 1994 from his home in Austin, Texas.

"Having read about the dogfight going on recently," the letter began, "concerning the groundswell of East Aurorans trying to stop Walmart from locating in East Aurora, I am prompted to write."

Those words brought back memories.

It's hard to believe that more than a quarter century has passed since a national real estate concern crept into town and suggested that a client they represented was looking into a large parcel of land behind the Post Office for a retail store. Interestingly, the realtors refused to utter the name of their client, so we townies (not as unaware as the realtors suspected) were therefore assured that they meant Walmart. And Walmart, or Sprawlmart as it had been nicknamed, represented to many of us disturbance in the Force, a threat to the economy, unity, personality and the very *gemeinschaft* (RIP Snake) of any small town it touched. Had J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series been around, we might have likened the chain, which had spread across the nation gobbling up every competitor in its path, to Harry's evil nemesis, Voldemort, "he who must not be named," rather fitting for an unnamed client

Thus began a battle reminiscent of David versus Goliath or, more secularly, the 1980 U.S.A. versus U.S.S.R. Olympic hockey game. The word on the street was that you didn't mess with Walmart—they would squash whatever opposition they encountered like a bug. After all, they had nearly as many stores as we had people; they probably had more lawyers than we had people. We could resist, the prevailing wisdom claimed, but in the end they would have their way.

Many of the kindred spirits in the community refused to surrender their town to an outside entity with a fistful of dollars but little regard for our history or lifestyle. We did our homework, discovering that the convenience of having everything you could possibly need under one 100,000 square foot roof on the outskirts of the village came with a high price. My most illuminating research came on a trip I took with my brothers around that time. We flew into New Orleans from our homes in Alaska, Vermont and East Aurora and, after a few days of revelry, embarked on a leisurely ramble toward the old hometown along the blue highways of the Deep South, Tennessee, both Virginias and Pennsylvania. Time and time again, we would arrive in a small town, looking to savor the atmosphere of an East Aurora-like place by stopping in at the local diner, watering hole or public library only to find Main Street deserted, yesterday's stores full of nothing but echoes. What businesses remained had become sellers of the leftover and unwanted—flea markets, used furniture and housewares co-ops, not-quite-antique stores, junktique boutiques. Often, on the edges of these forlorn boroughs, we'd see the shiny, new Walmart, its lights drawing shoppers like moths. You didn't need an advanced

degree in sociology, anthropology, land use planning, economics or business to connect those dots.

We discovered, as well, that the realtor's client—Walmart allegedly, although still unnamed to this day—had a business plan calling for the construction of as many as seven stores in our region, monitoring the success of each and closing a couple in a few years. The possibility that the retailer might open a store behind our Post Office, suck the life out of our Main Street and then leave was very real.

We were lucky in East Aurora, because the land that the unnamed suitor wanted behind the Post Office was not zoned appropriately for a big box retailer. The village board would have to approve a request for rezoning. And before that vote could occur, an election in March of 1995 would take place. That set up perhaps the most hotly contested local election since 1874 when residents had to decide between Willink and East Aurora as the name of their village. At stake was more than Walmart. We were deciding if we would succumb to the puzzling allure of sprawl, setting the stage for a neon and asphalt corridor all the way down 20A to Orchard Park, like Transit Road or Niagara Falls Blvd. Or would we remain a village unto itself, unique and livable?

There were some hard feelings during that time; many friendships suffered as those taken in by the thought of Walmart's shopping convenience and the promised bonanza of minimum wage jobs faced off with those who worried about the loss of hometown businesses and the village's unique character. Somehow, we managed to get through that election without poorly muffled trucks carrying quilt-sized flags making endless loops around the village hoping to intimidate naysayers.

In the end, the vote wasn't that close; a slate of challengers opposed to rezoning swept the vote with a huge turnout. The realtors withdrew and East Aurora became known far and wide as the giantkiller and as the Little Village That Could. We could stand at the helm of our own ship, until the next challenge.

As we rolled the RV back into the 14052 last Saturday, the sidewalks were full of people strolling, shopping and dining. Even in a pandemic now in its eighth month, the village works, imperfectly, of course, but it works. We'll never know what Main Street might look like had that vote in March of 1995 gone the other way, but as Mr. Hatch suggested in his letter 26 years ago, "Keep up the fight. It will be worth the effort."

