



The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

a bi-weekly column in the

East Aurora Advertiser

“Groundhog Day ”

Column 366, June 27, 2019/Prescott Valley, AZ

Prescott Valley, Arizona. As a seven-decade Western New Yorker finding himself in Arizona last week, I was reminded of the classic Bill Murray movie, *Groundhog Day*. Every morning of my visit I awakened early—5:30 or so (it being already the middle of the morning in my Eastern Daylight Time bio-clock)—and trundled down the stairs of my brother’s home. I opened the front door to retrieve the local newspaper (which pales in comparison to the world’s best hometown newspaper you hold in your hands, by the way) and was greeted by not only the *Prescott Courier*, but by brilliant sunshine and an absolutely cloudless, bluebird sky. The temperature was exactly 56 degrees at 5:30 each morning; it rose to 63 by seven, 80 by ten and reached 85 at one where it stayed for several hours before gradually gliding back down to 56 by the time I gathered the next morning’s newspaper. I quickly learned not to bother reading the weather forecast in the paper. As in *Groundhog Day*, each Prescott day would be exactly like its predecessor and would serve as a template for the tomorrows far out into the distance.

Contrast the Arizona experience with East Aurora mornings, where I open the door at first light to be greeted by a comprehensive catalogue of possibilities: frigid temperatures, even in June; pea soup fog; rain that might manifest itself as a light spritz or a deluge of biblical proportions; category four winds; or, just for a change of pace, sunshine and pleasant temperatures. Weather in Western New York is a zesty spice. To add to the mystery of the morning, I never know whether I will find a newspaper awaiting, the *Buffalo News* delivery contractor having taken the liberty of chucking my paper on (or near, anyway) my porch whenever he wants— as early as 5:30 and as late as half past brunch. The only groundhog in my East Aurora morning is our resident waddling, fur-bearing *Marmota monax* that daily tries to solve the fencing around my garden, so he can lay waste to my tender broccoli, cucumber and swiss chard plants.

I found *Groundhog Day*, and the repetition it showcased, an appropriate way to describe much of my recent visit to my brother’s house in the Desert Southwest. Author, professor, pioneer in distance education and educational technology,

conference keynote speaker in such matters on five or six continents—my brother Jason has been laid low by a lifetime’s worth of health issues in the last few years, all of them a matter of bad luck, not reckless living. My visit and that of my other brother Mike and several friends in rotation involved an unvarying routine of caregiving: medicines dispensed in specific manners at precise times and in precise amounts, a stomach tube feeding system that had to be supplied with nutrients and then maintained, visits to the dialysis clinic on a regular schedule, each day much like the previous one. Each day would be the same, a la *Groundhog Day*, but the repetition, rather than becoming tiresome, defined the quintessence of family love by allowing us the privilege of involvement in the hopefulness of his care.

Of course, we prideful East Aurorans tend to look at anyplace we visit through lenses ground to 14052 specifications. Let’s face it; we often secretly (and not so secretly) delight in finding something to carp about in other communities, and Prescott Valley, Arizona, offered this curmudgeon plenty. I remember *Groundhog Day*, how smart aleck weatherman Bill Murray finds himself stuck in time, how regardless of what he had done the day before, the next day would be the same, rooted not in reality but in an illusion. I got that feeling about Prescott Valley. Prescott Valley was plunked down in the desert in 1966 according to the “Welcome to...” sign, in a place where developers thought they could convince northerners to abandon their snowblowers and retire. Everyone I met was friendly and helpful, but I couldn’t escape the notion that this contrived town stood on an ephemeral (RIP Snake) foundation. Everything felt impermanent.

Certainly, the land is dramatic, enchanting even—a rugged, scrubby mountainous rockscape in colors we never see with cactus and wildlife and stunning day-long vistas. And the dry air can be salubrious, even in the heat.

But all the houses cluster in endless developments—cul-de-sac cities appearing as if they had been dropped from the sky into a tract of desert—and they look exactly the same. They’re 50 shades of earth-tone brown stucco from lightish to medium with pebble lawns and perhaps a southwestern-ish lawn ornament, laid out in floor plans so similar that getting lost in your own neighborhood would be easy. If you fell sound asleep and some pranksters moved you to another subdivision, you’d wake and be none the wiser. In fact, we heard of a neighbor with advancing dementia who took a walk in the development and became so disoriented by the similar-looking house types that she had to be guided home by considerate neighbors. Supporting each development are disposable—20 years maximum—shopping centers where the average life expectancy of a pedestrian would be one traffic light cycle. Yet the population has doubled in the last decade or so and shows no signs of slowing. Ask them why and they’ll say low taxes and warm weather.

I wonder sometimes if crummy weather, high taxes, a checkered economic past and an uncertain economic future don’t build character in our part of the world. Our town fathers and mothers—Warrens, Adams, Griffins, et al.—put down deep roots and wouldn’t have countenanced running away to the warmth. In Aurora, Willink

and East Aurora, they worked with the geography—land, woods and water—and were rewarded when commerce and population followed. Above all, they built a sense of home, a sense that even those of us who came a century later can relate to. I maintain that home is a more serious concept here than in a contrived and ephemeral place in the desert.

You will have to let me know if you think it's a stretch to brag that from our home here of a mere 13,000 souls, *Buffalo Spree Magazine* conferred 13 "Best of WNY 2019" awards to East Aurora or Elma businesses. Does it say something about the nature of the 14052/9? I'm not sure, but here they are. Apropos of Groundhog Day, several have won before. "Produce Great People," the man said; "The Rest Follows."

Buffalo Spree Magazine Best of WNY 2019 local winners:

Bar Bill—Best Wings (Southtowns)
Beulah's General Store—Best Storefront Display
Borderland—Best Outdoor Music Festival
42 North—Best Local Brewery (Southtowns)
Left Coast Tacos—Best Tacos (Southtowns)
Meibohm Fine Arts—Best Custom Fram Shop
Nigh Road Farmhouse—Best New Small Retail Business
189 Burger—Best Bar for Live Music
Roycroft Inn—Best Date Spot
Salon Elizabeth—Best Make-Up Services
Taste Bistro and Coffee Bar—Best Coffee Shop (Southtowns)
Vidler's—Most Fun Place to Shop
Wallenwein's—Best Fish Fry (Southtowns)