

A STORIED HISTORY

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Love and the godliness of man and beast



ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS/1985

John Coit

1948-1986 • Columnist

John Coit charged into town in the early '80s, a flawed man trailing bad marriages and bad habits.

But the *Rocky*'s new columnist arrived with big talent and a big heart. Denver soon loved him.

Coit was the paper's star columnist for a short time, only 2½ years, yet he managed to tell the stories of a city and its people in a way that deeply touched his readers.

"He seemed able to relate to all of us," the late *Rocky* editor Ralph Looney wrote.

The end came on Jan. 11, 1986, and it was nearly unbelievable.

Coit was 38 when he died of a heart attack, 11 days after marrying Susan O'Malley in a New Year's Eve ceremony in the lobby of the *Rocky*.

In this column, written just weeks before his death, Coit confided something that must have reassured his readers. He was happy. Finally.

It was 4 in the morning, a day or so ago. On the scratched coffee table that's been with me since college were some 2,000 letters. I was determined to read them all.

Already I had read of pain, of disappointment, of laughter, of love. A thousand emotions mingled with mine, our tears ran together, silent rivers on this early morning.

The fire was cheery, and the tree we bought the day before was trimmed. Upstairs the children slept while my partner, O'Malley, wrapped presents and read the good ones out loud. Outside a half-moon lit the mountains and made the snow glisten.

I had asked you for Christmas memories, and 2,133 of you responded.

I have been a professional writer for 18 years. Now, I was just a reader, a voyeur into the Christmas Past of so many, a silent visitor riding along on the midnight journeys to a hundred grandmothers' houses, some on a snowy prairie, some in frozen mountain keeps, some on icebound Midwestern rivers.

I suffered the disappointment of a little boy who ate beans with his exhausted mother on a Depression Christmas Eve in a dusty West Texas town, a kid who ran from his wealthy friend's home to his cot in a hovel on the wrong side of the grain elevator, sobbing into the pillow, "I don't want Christmas anymore."

I grieved with a little girl in North Denver whose mother was shot dead by a gang of boys on Christmas Eve.

I was warmed by the love of so many mothers and fathers, the sacrifices they made to put a plastic car or a new scarf or a pair of warm socks under the tree.

Santa Claus was less an old poet's fraud, somehow. He is real, as real as love and so many of you knew that was so.

And there were letters, not stories.

To the guy who will see his wife and four kids with sober eyes this Christmas, God bless. Booze and toot have twisted so many of us, my brother. Sober can be boring, but it's better than hell.

To Tana. Your poem is beautiful. I will selfishly keep it to myself.

And, yes, Freddy Bosco, Bedouin of East Colfax, Poet of the Misbegotten, smoke your Kools and drink your Gallo red. I remember how insane we were in the Laundromat two winters ago, our socks and underwear rolling around and around, drinking cheap wine and smoking endlessly and wondering why life had gone so wrong.

Go gentle into this magic night.

To Mike Boyles, the African journey was not a tale of Christmas, but it was a tale of love and the godliness of man and beast. And that is Christmas, after all. And Mike, thanks for the job you gave my friend. He doesn't have to go back to Blake Street anymore.

To the 87-year-old woman who laboriously typed her recollection of Christmas in a Japanese internment camp in the Philippines when she watched the slow starvation of her husband and four chil-

dren. Of their deliverance, all of them, at the end of the war. Thank you.

If I could, I would have published each letter, each story, each poem. As I said, this was not a contest. There are no winners, no losers. That wasn't the deal.

All year I tap out these epistles, and now you have returned the favor in spades. Your gift to me was 2,000 Christmases, each special, each wonderfully remembered, powerful and beautiful, all coming together like a nova, a special star.

If I had a gift for you, it would be only this: That you put these stories down on paper, which somehow makes them immortal.

The three stories I picked to publish were simply representative of them all, stories that deal with eternal hope that is this season. They were moving to me, and they told stories of love, stories of loss, stories of enduring human compassion.

So many of you inspired so many memories.

D. Taylor Paulson, former lieutenant in the Nurse Corps, remembering Christmas Day in the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon.

A Vietnamese colonel took the lieutenant home to his family, and in the Asian tradition, made Paulson one of them. For a while there were no cries from wounded American teen-age soldiers, no morgue for Marines, no blind Vietnamese children, no napalm-burned grandmothers.

I remember you, Lt. Paulson, or one like you, angel of mercy, goddess in white, soft hand, American accent, sister, mystic lover in wild, injured, morphine dreams. Thank you.

Julie Thomas, whose uncle is dying this Christmas season.

Wonderful, comforting Uncle Jack, the founder of so many lovely Christmases Past, who with his wife lulled three generations to sleep on a Christmas Eve.

"It seemed a precious gift to give my children, a glimpse of gentle lives lived with grace from another age.

"And this Christmas there will be no stories from Uncle Jack, but he isn't forgotten as he waits."

Not by you, Julie Thomas, nor by me.

And, *mazel tov*, Barbara Indich Geller, an Orthodox Jew who found a place in the Christian festival of love one Christmas when she ended a five-year search for a beloved teacher and friend she had thought dead.

Jim Bernath, you wrote my personal favorite.

I was there with you and your brothers and sisters, riding in a car with your pool-shooting, cardsharp of an old man and long-suffering mother, across frozen plains of Texas to Wichita Falls, sitting in a cheap motel room while your old man and uncle drank beer and ignored the day.

I was in Texas that Christmas of 1959, riding out of San Angelo down a two-lane in a '54 Pontiac with my old man, who pulled a flask of Crab Orchard Whiskey

out of the glove compartment, taking long swigs and goosing the old bird along at 90 miles per hour straight through Brady, the heart of Texas, on the way to San Antonio where my mother and sister waited in temporary housing at Lackland Field.

He never said a word for 6 hours. I thought his driving was swell.

Thanks, Jim. I know about cold Texas sunrises.

And to Bill Fraser, you are exactly right.

"It's a nice idea, to take one day a year for reflecting on things like forgiveness and remembering the people you love. Even giving presents is a good idea. It's the leap between theory and practice that has us hung up. We each have to find our own way out. Me, I'm going to concentrate on taking some of the pain out of someone else's life. The part I put there."

Amen.

When I finished the last letter, I called Steve McCracken in Washington. He's the art director of *The Washington Post Magazine*, my best friend, and the nearest thing to a brother that I have. It was 6 a.m. on the East Coast. He was still working on a piece, speed drawing through the night to make a deadline.

Before I could tell him about the letters, we started talking about our Christmas together in 1983, when I was just getting this column going out here, and he was selling pictures for a couple of hundred bucks a piece.

Drunk and heartbroken, we sat in his Capitol Hill flat two blocks from the Supreme Court building and thought about our children, who were all with maternal grandparents, and the women who had been our wives, who were with other men.

I had not been able to stop crying that night. McCracken is more of a stoic than I. He just drew a picture and listened.

"Damn, Steve," I said. "We don't even have a bloody Christmas tree." He smiled, and took a long piece of green wrapping paper and cut it into the shape of an evergreen.

We each had a pocketful of money from a children's book we had published in November. We seemed bent on drinking it up.

I finally passed out on the floor, thinking that all I had left to live for was custody of a 12-year-old boy from marriage No. 1 and a good job in Denver. I felt like the two little ones from marriage No. 2 were gone forever.

When I woke the next morning, the first thing I saw was the cutout tree on the wall. He had covered me with one of his kids' Bambi blankets. We drove all over the District looking for a place to eat, finally finding a Pakistani restaurant where we had some spiced chicken and curry rice.

We both laughed, as we remembered.

Life is good for both of us now. He's head of the art department for one of the best newspaper magazines in the country, winning art awards and running around with some knockout lady. His son and daughter were with him this Christmas. He sounded happy, content.

And I'm finally OK. The column is working, there's a good woman in my life, all the wounds are healed.

God's in His heaven, so to speak.

I told McCracken about the letters, about the 2,133 Christmases.

"The people are wise, John," he said.

Yes, they are.

God bless you, every one.