

## ‘Tis the Season

Charles J. Krumbein

January 2024

Back when I was a kid in the early 1950's, my mother would give me and my younger brother Jim a quarter each on Saturday morning and we would head to the movie theater on Main Street in my hometown of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, and hand that quarter over at the window in front and spend all day watching movies on a big screen. Typically, we would be treated to a newsreel, an episode of a serial starring Dick Tracy, the Green Hornet, or Batman, a "B" picture western with Gene Autry or Roy Rogers, and the main "A" movie, which could feature perhaps the latest Abbott & Costello comedy, or maybe one with Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis, or perhaps a Bing Crosby and Bob Hope "road" movie. Saturday mornings and afternoons back then were strictly for the kids. One more necessary part of this regular Saturday saturnalia was, of course, the cartoons. Some kids liked Woody Woodpecker, others loved Heckle & Jeckle, and there were certainly fans of the Disney lineup with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck and their friends. But for my brother and me, none of those cartoons could ever beat those put out by Warner Brothers as Looney Tunes or Merrie Melodies. Within that latter lineup, for us the top ones had to have Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd (or Yosemite Sam in a pinch, if all else failed). To this day, I rank at the very top of the Warner Brothers cartoons the so-called "Hunting Trilogy": "Rabbit Fire" (1951), "Rabbit Seasoning" (1952), and "Duck, Rabbit, Duck" (1953), all directed by the inimitable Chuck Jones. Aside from doing a little fishing, I was never much of a sportsman myself. Unless, that is, one counted hunting down or "stalking" various celebrities. (Let's call them, for lack of a better general term, "Elmers," without the "Fudd," especially when a number of them ended up disgracing themselves.) At that game I have truly excelled.

Of all the various categories of celebrities that I have made an effort to meet, the one that I wish to focus on here would be those who were world leaders or politicians. They are usually the toughest prey to encounter, except when they make themselves available during primary season, which is in full swing in Iowa right now. Because I taught college in Iowa for over twenty-five years, my access to them became much easier in my later years from the 1980's through the 2010's. However, I actually began my hobby of political celebrity encounters well before my days in Iowa. What I can say is that most of these occasions came about either directly or indirectly as a result of my pursuit of education. For example, when I was both first a high school student and then a college student looking to earn my B.A. degree, I worked at a woman's dress shop on Main Street as stock boy and maintenance person. One day in the spring of 1960, as I was taking my walk home from my job, I saw three men crossing Main Street and entering the Retlaw Hotel. Two were obviously Secret Service personnel. The third I recognized immediately as then-Senator John F. Kennedy. He was no more than twenty yards away. I was confirmed in my brush with a future president when a story on him was featured that afternoon on the front page of the *Fond du Lac Commonwealth Reporter*. I could not vote for him as I was only eighteen at the time, but as both of my parents were life-long Democrats, I certainly supported him over Nixon. Later in 1962, when Marilyn Monroe, in a low-cut, shimmering gown, breathily sang, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President!" he acquired a touch of

“Elmer”. A couple of years later, I was leaving my dress-shop job again, but this time at age twenty-one. That was in 1963 when I ran into Wisconsin Senator Bill Proxmire. I spoke to him for five minutes and assured him that he had my vote in the coming election. In return, he took my name and address and told me that he would send me a copy of *The Congressional Record*. I thanked him and walked away. Little did I realize that my home mailbox would soon be flooded for the next year with almost daily copies of that document, much to my mother’s dismay. I actually tried reading them for the first couple of months, but soon became overwhelmed. But I did become much more politically savvy as a result.

When I left Wisconsin in 1964 to go to school seeking my M.A. degree at San Francisco State University, I had two encounters with celebrity politicians. For the first term, I was living with my cousin Robert Davies in Pacifica, about twelve miles south of the SFSU campus. My ride into school was with a neighbor of my cousin’s named Skip who owned an old beat-up 1961 MG Midget in British Racing Green. We did not agree politically, but I still jumped at the chance when he asked me to accompany him to the downtown Fairmont Hotel to a reception for gubernatorial candidate Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy. I knew of Reagan from his time hosting *Death Valley Days* on television. Of course, I never told my father that I shook hands with two members of the GOP. (St. Ronnie became an “Elmer” when Iran/Contra entered his later presidency.) Then, less than two years later, in spring of 1966, when I was living at the New Alden Hotel behind the San Francisco Civic Center, I was coming back from lunch on Market Street when I found my way blocked by a protest rally. Stepping out of the huge black limo on his way to meet the city’s mayor was all 6’ 4” of LBJ. (Vietnam, along with the illegal bombing of Cambodia, was of course the “Elmer” around his neck.) As current president, he was surrounded by a phalanx of Secret Service men so that the jeering crowd could not prevent him from making his way through the ornate gate. He was to be the next in line of several more of my presidential encounters.

I was drafted into the U.S. Army in September of 1966, which caused a delay in finishing my M.A. degree. After extensive training, I was sent to Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, in June of 1967. By September of that year, I was doing volunteer teaching of Shakespeare and then Modern Drama for two terms at the University of Asmara. When graduation rolled around in June of 1968, I was standing in a lineup of teachers and had the honor of meeting a true world leader as none other than His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I went down the line and shook the hands of all the teachers, after handing out the diplomas to each of the graduates. I was now a teacher who had met an emperor. My one-year volunteer job experience led directly to my applying to teach with the UMUC European Division and to do so for the rest of my Army duty until September of 1970. I then stayed on with UMUC until May of 1975 when I returned to Wisconsin with a wife and two children to pursue my Ph. D. at the UW in Madison. It was because of one of those children that my next meeting with a politician occurred. In the summer of 1980, I was taking my two young boys on a tour of the Wisconsin capitol building. My son Christopher informed me that he needed to use a toilet and very soon. I looked around and did not see any signs pointing to a public restroom. But his urgency lead him to run up to a man in a group of three and ask where the toilet was. Leave it to Chris that out of a crowd of people in the center of that building he would choose to ask for assistance from none other than Lee Sherman Dreyfus, sporting his signature red vest, and the current

governor of the state of Wisconsin. I expressed my apologies, but the governor said that he was glad to be of help to one of his citizens. I am sure that Chris was also glad to find relief.

On a Saturday in the late spring of 1987, I had a two-fer: I attended a morning rally at the auditorium of the downtown campus of Madison Area Technical College for Jesse Jackson and had a seat in the front row. It was held during his "Run, Jesse, Run" days as he did not even declare his candidacy until the following October. It was one of the most dynamic speeches that I have ever been privileged to hear. To top it off, Colorado Senator Gary Hart was holding a noon rally at the Wisconsin state capitol building just a couple of blocks away. I went over there, got in the lineup, and after the Democratic front-runner candidate Hart spoke, he went down the line and shook every third hand or so, one of which was mine. Of course, just a few weeks later, he also became an "Elmer" when scandal hit him in the form of a certain young lady named Donna Rice, by his taking a boat trip with her (on the ironically named Monkey Business) at the same time that he was also married. He dropped out of the race in the face of the scandal and his presidential career soon dissolved before the eyes of the paparazzi press that hounded him everywhere.

As it turned out, he was not the last Democratic front runner to be taken down by an extra-marital scandalous affair while he was married. I went to a rally for North Carolina Senator John Edwards in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 2007. In attendance at that same rally was John Edwards' wife Elizabeth, who had just discovered that she had breast cancer. Edwards was introduced to the audience by singer/song writer Carole King, who also played and sang several of her smash hits, including "I Feel the Earth Move" and again ironically, "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" Where Gary Hart had complained back in 1987 that the press "followed me everywhere," by twenty years later there was no longer any reticence "to smell the blood in the water" when it came to politicians and their indiscretions. He became an "Elmer" and the gloves really came off when Edwards' wife was in the hospital being treated for her breast cancer and her candidate husband was carrying on with one of his staffers named Rielle Hunter, over ten years his junior, who was hired to do a series of mini-documentaries of life on the campaign trail. Part of that "life" produced a daughter with Ms. Hunter named Quinn. Once the infamous *National Enquirer* got hold of the story in late October, all gloves were off. The days of JFK dallying with Marilyn Monroe in the White House while everyone there turned a blind eye to such affairs were clearly over forever.

One more star on the Democratic horizon that I have encountered, who also unfortunately had been the subject of a scandal, was President Bill Clinton. In this instance, it was 2008 and the former president was stumping for his wife Hillary in her first presidential campaign run. The venue was a huge circus tent set up in a field in DeWitt, Iowa, where I went to hear his speech with my colleague Tom Gibbons, who had a post on the Democratic Party for Clinton County. The one odd thing which I recall about this occasion was that he made a very impassioned speech essentially about "what this country needs is a woman running it." However, when it came time for the audience to become involved, Bill Clinton only fielded questions that were posed by the women in the crowd. Both my friend Tom and I had our hands raised, but we were never called upon, nor were any of those other males in the hot tent. (Thoughts of his "Elmer" days with Monica Lewinski crept into my mind.) Folks who brought copies of his book to be signed, or any autograph seekers, or those who just wanted to shake his

hand were also out of luck as he deftly slipped out one of the tent flaps and left us all sort of unsatisfied, especially the men. It was not my most memorable encounter with a political hero that I had voted for on both possible opportunities.

In that same political season of 2008, I had a much better encounter with New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who was also running for president at the time. He was actually made available at the house of a staunch Democrat friend of mine named Sally Nelson and her doctor husband Richard. We were gathered as a group of about twenty supporters and this time I did get my question about veteran's rights answered by the candidate who then warmly shook my hand and thanked me for my service. I was wearing my baseball cap with the insignia of the Army Security Agency on it. Had he actually made it past the primary season, I may well have voted for him.

Instead, my vote went, of course, to Illinois Senator Barack Obama who in March of 2007 actually held a rally in the small auditorium of Clinton Community College. All I had to do was stroll the fifty yards or so from my office to have a seat right on the stage with the man who would soon become president number 44. His hair was still a rich black (see the photo below) with no signs of gray in it at all. He spoke passionately about the need for change in our country after the tumultuous eight long years under Dubya and allowed questions from anyone who ventured to ask them, after which he posed for photos and shook hands all around. One of my female students even had the opportunity to interview him for the college newspaper before he was escorted out the door on his way to a rally down in Davenport. Although at the time I did not think that he had much of a chance to win, I was soon made a rabid convert to his "Yes We Can" proposals. He was a class act from the very first moment I had the chance to meet him and to hear him speak in person. His years as president certainly bore out my final impression of him from that afternoon at my college.

Among other famous political personages who visited the Iowa college and spoke at the school auditorium were Elizabeth Dole, who was campaigning for her husband Bob at the time, and in 2009 Caroline Kennedy-Schlossberg, the daughter of JFK, who was not running for office but just making the rounds on behalf of the Democratic Party. I did manage to photograph her on the sidewalk outside the school after her presentation. She had all of the poise of her father (and mother) and if she were ever to consider running for an office for which I had the ability to vote, she would have it. As for Mrs. Dole and her husband, that would never happen. I could thank her silently for the extra safety light on the back of American vehicles, but her politics do not fall in line with mine.

To wrap up this memoir on political encounters, I would like to close with two more females who ran for president and for one of whom I voted. On Friday, August 14, 2015, I drove down to Dubuque, Iowa, to meet up with my friend Tom Gibbons and to attend a rally for Hillary Rodham Clinton. Ms. Clinton spoke movingly and passionately about the differences between herself and her opponent, who does not need to be named here, but who is, coincidentally, the biggest "Elmer" of all time. (In fact, just exactly one week later, said opponent held a rally in that very same venue in Dubuque, and no, I did not make the drive down there a second time.) I have included a photo of myself with Hillary at the end of this memoir. She was not like her husband in that she did allow and respond to questions from everyone who wished to ask

them, and she obviously did stick around and pose for photographs with anyone who wished to take them. I thank my friend Tom for taking some photos for me and I returned the favor for him. She certainly had my vote that year. I did ask her if she was going to make a trip up to Wisconsin any time soon and she said that she would. Her failure to do so certainly cost her votes in my home state as a result. In what was a very close election, it pains me to think that Wisconsin may have made a huge impact and difference. We all paid a heavy price for the eventual result.

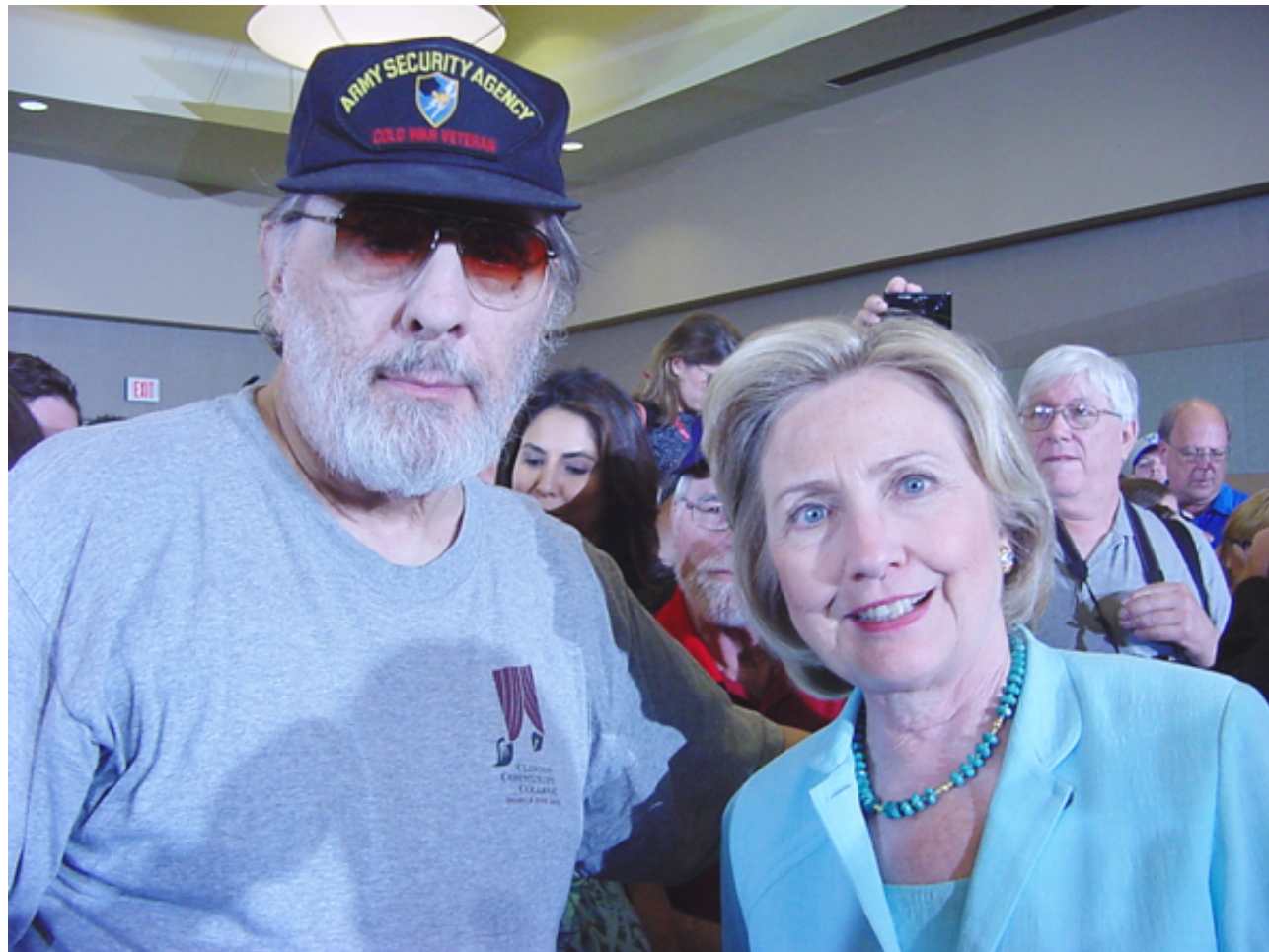
Finally, on Friday, April 26, 2019, almost ten years after my retirement, I went back down to Clinton, Iowa, for a rally being held for Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, who was making her run for president at the time. Again, they all come to Iowa during the campaign season, especially just before the caucus is held there as the first state that gets to offer any kind of meaningful vote. Candidates from both parties crisscross the state in a frantic effort to win early support. They may also fly back and forth between Iowa and New Hampshire or South Carolina, but the one place where one can meet and greet with little inconvenience is clearly Iowa. That may now be changing slightly, as some states move up their primaries in an effort to be first. But one only has to look at all of the attention in the national news focused on this hardy Midwestern state to see how much the cornfed folks there matter politically. In any case, Senator Warren made an excellent speech on behalf of public education at a former elementary school auditorium. She was personable, approachable, and posed for photos with everyone who lined up to have them taken. Proof of that is again on display at the end of this memoir. Had she managed to make it further along in her campaign, she would certainly have had my vote. Education is still one of the main reasons I would vote for a candidate. As the old saying goes, "Old teachers never die, they just lose their class." Or, alternatively, "Old teachers never die, they just grade away." Take your pick.

I count it a real privilege to have been a college/university teacher for over forty years, starting with the UMUC European Division and ending with Clinton Community College in the political epicenter of Iowa. I treasure highly my memories both of being in the classroom to educate students and then the side benefits afforded me to meet so many major politicians in my lifetime. I am glad to have voted for the ones who made the cut after the primaries and for all of the differences that they have made in our lives, both as citizens and educators. If I can do so, I will welcome future opportunities to add to this extensive list. After all, in this country, one is forever caught up in one political campaign after another., with candidates frantically hopping all across the land. It seems that the (rabbit?) "season" never really ends, unlike that of any major sport, such as baseball or football. One could well wish it to be otherwise, but then this is not the UK or Australia.

So, as Bugs Bunny, alongside Daffy Duck, in the WB cartoon "Rabbit Fire" says, after several heated exchanges of "Rabbit Season!" and "Duck Season!" as they tear off the respective signs posted on a tree and then come to a sudden realization at seeing a different sign: "Sssshhh! Be vewwy vewwy quiet. We're hunting Elmers!" "Bah-deep, bah-deep, bah-deep! That's all, folks!"



Note: The still-youthful Senator Barack Obama in a close crowd of early supporters at Clinton Community College responds to questions. One of his Secret Service personnel hovers behind him.



Note: That is my friend Tom Gibbons standing just behind Hillary Clinton, over her left shoulder. He did also take other photos of me, but I had handed my camera off to one of Hillary's handlers for this particular photograph taken in Dubuque, Iowa. My shirt emblem reads, "Clinton Community College Fine Arts Department."



Note: Senator Elizabeth Warren and I after her speech in Clinton, Iowa. I am wearing one of my military-based baseball caps. She does indeed have her arm around me. I am wearing my same shirt.