Researching History, One Newspaper at a Time

By Chuck Mauro

Old newspapers provide a window into the past.

One of the things I truly enjoy when doing research on Herndon's history is reading old newspapers. I often find such interesting information about the way people used to live 50, 75, even 100 years ago. So, I thought I'd pick a date and read a whole newspaper just to see what life in Herndon was like at that time.

There are quite a number of newspaper archives available in the library. The *Alexandria Gazette* was published from 1784 to 1945. The *Hendon Observer News* was published from 1925 to 1943. That left me with the *Fairfax Herald*, which was published from 1886 to 1973. I chose the December 26, 1952 edition—close enough to when I was born—and sat down to see what was going on.

The front page of the paper had a Dedication For 1953:

This is the Year that for you waits Beyond tomorrow's mystic gates.

One story concerning Herndon was about a Mrs. Sallie Martz, age 82, who was found dead after having accidently fallen through the top of a 10-foot cistern in the ground. (Cisterns were used to collect rainwater from the roof for household use.)

Another article announced, "A new vending machine, one which brews coffee and keeps it hot, and, at the same time, refrigerates the cream to be used and then disperses both, plus sugar and a spoon... (which) at last makes possible the traditional American cup of coffee in the factory, office, hotel, lobby and transportation terminal at the drop of a coin." I guess we always wanted a good cup of Joe!

There were a number of announcements of ongoing church services in the area, the Herndon Masonic Lodge electing officers, and St. Timothy's P.E. Church presenting a Christmas pageant. There also was an announcement that the Methodist Church had formed a men's club.

As for social news, I always find it interesting that the paper would identify individuals who were spending the holidays with friends or relatives for two or three weeks, or who was the dinner guest, or spent Christmas day with someone else. I'm not sure we would publish information about people leaving their house for an extended period of time today!

The paper also contained short fictional holiday stories. One was about an 11-year-old boy named Nevvy who took a Christmas tree out of someone else's trash after Christmas so that his family could celebrate. He was caught while taking the tree, and the owner

listened to Nevvy's story about his father being out of work with five children who just couldn't have Christmas without a tree. The owner took pity on poor Nevvy, went back into his house to dress up, and came to Nevvy's house as Santa Claus. So heartwarming!

Another story, entitled "Christmas Cheer," involved Nan, a young nurse at the local hospital on Christmas Eve. She had been listening to old Mrs. Smith talk on and on about her youth and about an expected visitor who, after a while, Nan sincerely doubted was coming. Finally, late in the evening, the visitor arrived. He turned out to be Mrs. Smith's very handsome grandson who, apologizing for his tardiness, asked the young nurse out to dinner for being so kind to his grandmother.

I encourage you to do some research, too. Unfortunately, the microfilm collection is not available at the Herndon Fortnightly Library, but it is not far to go to the Virginia Room on the top floor of the City of Fairfax Regional Library on North Street. There are more current newspapers on file there as well.

If you do go, please remember to take some coins, as the microfilm printers charge \$.25 a printed copy. I used 14 quarters in printing the newspaper I looked at. Just ask the librarian where the historical newspaper microfilm and readers are, and away you go.

I hope that you will find a newspaper that truly provides a window into the past for you, just as it did for me!