

4/1/89
Harold Weisberg

Save Roy Meachum!

Roy Meachum's pen being mightier than Excalibur, there is a city-wide conspiracy to "get even" with him.

E'er the yawning gates of durance vile clank with him inside, his friends, particularly the numerous anonymous ones cited in his "Fences" column of March 25, ought start a defense fund.

Where oh where is the American Civil Liberties Union when he and he alone struggles against evil politicians on behalf of all of us, in his own wife's own words, "How can they take away our constitutional rights?" The right "to keep the picket fence Sharon wanted all her life."

That I do not recall mention of fences in the Constitution does not mean that there is none to picket fences. The closest I could come in pondering this deep thinking was to walls. "Something there is that does not love a wall," but that is poetry, not law. Besides, some 30 years ago I did establish, in federal court, that the property owner owns the air above his property to the point required to enjoy his property, which is a constitutional right. Fences being more solid than air, who can say that picket fences are not a constitutional right?

He needs a defense fund, from his own words, because after so extensive a career in print and electronic journalism, including, again from his own accounts, executive positions and network employment, in addition to employment by local TV stations, the Meachums are not li- quid: "she is remaking her 'dream house' with borrowed money."

There were more than the three recent columns on this picket fence, and they should have paid for lots of pickets. This, he says, is the last. So, a practical suggestion might be to continue this lengthy series because he gets paid for each column and with these as a fair sample, it isn't all that difficult to knock them out.

Others should rally to his side,

Mr. Meachum suggests this monster conspiracy against him going up to and including the mayor. So, he can expect to have this and all his other columns examined by the lawyer for this conspiracy. Credibility of a witness is always a suitable subject of questions.

many others from his account, the owners of those "hundreds of Frederick homes" that an order to remove a fence "should throw a chill into."

That I have not seen any illegal fences in Frederick does not mean there are none. He says hundreds, so hundreds it must be. Not counting those that existed before the 1964 ordinance which, as usual, has a "grandfather" clause making them legal.

His observation of "hundreds" is as undoubtedly dependable as his allegations of a political conspiracy: "Friends have suggested that I should have been warned the mayor would "get even."

Do not ask questions about only unnamed "friends" cited as authority because just as any writer can just make this up and nobody is the wiser, so also can it be true. Its truth is fortified by the fact that "four different attorneys," all unnamed, "declined our case" because they don't want "to get on the wrong side of the mayor."

And, again in his modest account, everybody in City Hall hangs on his

every printed word.

I've had a few experiences with lawyers and judges and I wish the Meachums no harm, certainly not when Sharon cried "tears of frustration" when she learned that the law applies to her and him, as it does to mortals. So, based on these experiences I make a few suggestions that just might be helpful because lawyers can get in trouble if they say in court what is even a little bit twisted, real trouble if it is not true, and it can be perjury if a witness states what is not true.

Can the Meachums sue without appearing as witnesses, under oath?

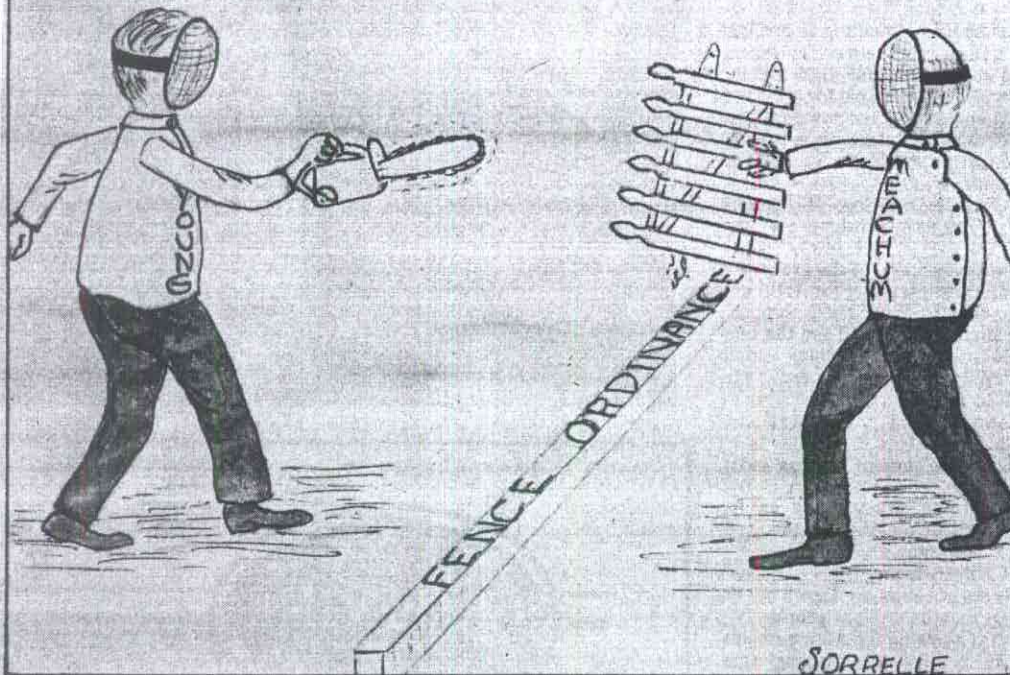
First and foremost, I suggest what he may recall from the past, strict accuracy and precision of language. From this column a few examples of the opposite that can mean so much trouble in court and under oath:

There is a "barrage of public jokes" and "City Hall whispers and blatant charges that her husband had been caught red-handed in an illegal act." It is not the charges that are blatant, an indication of how helpful editing can be, but the "illegal act." It should have read, "caught red-handed in a blatantly illegal act." Accuracy and precision.

The Meachums' fence "was impossible to miss, simply because of the public nature of my work." The fence was impossible to miss because it is not like air and was very visible. Nobody could miss it. It was there. It was talked and laughed about long before the obvious violation was charged.

It is a nice touch that he admits, a rarity, that something "was dumb on my part," but I don't think an unbiased judge would appreciate being told that his "dumbness" was merely "allowing a company to put up a fence" when he ordered it himself or that he should have "allowed" this "without checking for permit" when in fact he had to seek and get a permit that he knows very well could not and would not have been issued.

A NEW STYLE FENCING OR "MEACHUMGATE"?



With typical modesty he attributes the name I've never heard of "Frederick's great fence war" to a former Washington Post colleague. Anonymity is not welcome in the courts, as some of this language might not be to some local judges, particularly if they are not afraid of exaggeration: "What did that guy (mayor) Young do, threaten to burn down the (News-Post) building?"

Name-dropping isn't always well received and irony ought not be cited as fact: "A friend from my television years wants me to send a few stories, editorials and my columns to '60 Minutes.' It's a natural," he said, "and you know executive producer) Don Hewitt." I

When he and he alone started all this "furor" and wrote those many columns, it might not be well accepted if he says again that

"neither Sharon nor I have any desire to expand the furor" that they alone caused and expanded because "'outside' media might find an 'angle' that would reflect unfavorably on Frederick," which, of course they love. Unfavorable reflection is, of course, a possibility, but not necessarily on the city which has done no more than ask that he observe the laws. Calling what is no more than law enforcement "the whims of City Hall" might not go over so well with judges who see to it that the laws are enforced. They might not like having their decisions referred to as "whims."

On the other hand, despite the noble and stated selflessness of the Meachums' interest in going to court, he says, anyway, I don't think it will, for many reasons. More than these few selections from this one column. Mr. Meachum suggests this monster conspiracy against him going up to and including the mayor.

So, he can expect to have this and all his other columns examined by the lawyer for this conspiracy. Credibility of a witness is always a suitable subject of questions. And the files of the papers also include letters and commentaries criticizing his columns as untruthful. If the Meachums do get a lawyer and do pursue this matter in court, he won't be much of a lawyer and he won't do them much good if he does not warn them that the lawyer for this alleged conspiracy will be reading excerpts from his columns and asking, "Are those your words?" and "are they true?"

No, I don't think it will get to that point.

But on the off chance that it does, his friends, anonymous and other, ought start a fund to "save Roy Meachum." Saving Roy Meachum from himself will not be easy.

Harold Weisberg lives in Frederick.