

3 July 1979

Dear Harold and Lil:

A tardy note to thank you for your good letter of June 9. I've been so busy that I've only now found time to reply. Much of the time has been spent getting caught up with a lot of tree trimming, brush cutting and weeding.

All the poop on the whip mowers is most welcome. I haven't graduated to that stage yet but probably shall sooner or later. When I do your advice will be most useful, and I plan to try one out on a rental basis some time if the right type is available.

Since you've seen this place only at night, I should explain that the lot is 75' wide on the average and runs down from the road at an average 30° angle for 150 feet. The house sits about midway on a shelf. Above it, between the house and road, the hillside is well under control. When we first moved here in 1958 we spent two years clearing out thick patches of blackberry vines and poison oak, painting the stumps with 24D and 245T, and they've about given up and in any case are covered now with a thick growth of ivy which is so well established that when a blackberry sprout rears its head it's easily spotted and disposed of. Among the ivy there are several bay trees, some pines, and big, well-pruned shrubs such as cotoneaster and one firebush (pyrocanthus). The cotoneaster is a relative of the apple family with a velvety leaf and a bright red berry which ferments in the winter before falling and provides an annual display of drunken robins and other birds which eat too many fermenting berries and get quite drunk. They fly off wobbling and often make ridiculous mistakes in judgment when landing. Anyway, the area above the house is well in hand. All I do is a light weeding twice a year, trim back ivy from the walkway edges, keep the trees pruned and the shrubs trimmed back, and it looks good.

Below the house it's another matter. More trees, with tall grass and considerable blackberries and poison oak still thriving here and there. I keep some of the trees trimmed in order to prevent their blocking the view, but never yet have tried to keep the grass down (it's a fire hazard in the dry season) and barely keep the blackberries and poison oak from taking over everything. It's here that the whip mower might help.

Glad you liked the trivet. I think I told you that I got the idea from them when the Hospice nurses asked me to frame some cork bulletin boards for them. This was with redwood, and I made the first few trivets with redwood bindings.. Then a cancer widow whom I know asked me to frame a painting canvas for her and provided some superb Philippine mahogany for the job, some that her late husband had used in trimming the inside of their house. While I was about it I made her a couple of trivets from the leftover mahogany, and she was so pleased that she gave me her husband's entire stock of mahogany. Since then I've used the winter months to build up a supply of trivets, ripping the mahogany timbers on the table saw and fitting the binding to various thicknesses of cork "tiles" that local importers bring in from Spain. I've probably given away a couple of dozen, all over the country.


In the meantime, Hospice has been taking up more and more of my time. In recent weeks I've been up there nearly every working day, particularly since they started a training course for home care volunteers. Then the other day the information director, with whom I mostly work, brought up the idea with the high price of gasoline they really should be compensating me in some way. My reaction was that they ought to know I'd do the same work gladly, without compensation, but that as a practical matter it would be very nice indeed if they could figure out some way to cover my travel expenses. The result was an agreement to retain my part-time services as a temporary employe on an hourly basis, which would enable them to avoid such hassels as social security and withholding deductions, insurance coverage, etc., and still pay me enough to cover mileage costs with perhaps a bit besides.

The best part of it is that I now can devote myself to something that really interests me as unique and necessary and not have to worry about how much it's costing me. An extra dividend is that I'm assigned to the said information director, Joanne Hively, who is one of the most competent PIOs I've ever run into. She's been with Hospice of Marin from the beginning (she worked a year as a volunteer), knows the health care field inside out from long family connections (her father was a hospital administrator and her ex-husband still runs the emergency ward at Kaiser Hospital in San Francisco) and at one time edited a monthly magazine in SF. Of all the people at HOM she's the one who couldn't be replaced, and consequently is overworked and needs help. And of all the volunteers I'm the one who can help her in certain ways where others lack the experience. In the three working days I've been under her lash we've cleared away several accumulated jobs she had stacked up on her desk, and today she handed me one that had been especially bugging her, a draft for a rewrite of an outdated history of HOM which she did a couple of years ago.

This arrangement suits me very well, if only because I can maintain my status as a freelance (for income tax purposes) by reporting my modest earnings as fees for temporary assistant and consultant in public relations. Which is quite true, although I do all sorts of things as needed and where I can.

Example: No sooner had Joanne and the executive director, a nurse named Mary Taverna and a very savvy gal indeed, hired me than Bill Lamers, the medical director who helped found HOM three years ago, shanghaied me to do a job for him -- editing a draft of a symposium on bereavement therapy which he and several other shrinks had assembled in three separate and isolated subcommittees. I did it in an hour, but Joanne and Mary were outraged. They told Bill this was for the National Hospice ~~Assoc~~ Association (on the board of which Bill sits) and therefore could not be charged to HOM. I settled the incipient dispute by ruling that it was just another volunteer job as far as I was concerned, and that it could be recorded as my recognition of and tribute to Bill's eminence in his field, and, of course, his magnificent beard. Everyone laughed, but Bill hasn't dared to try it again. We run a tight ship, but it's fun and most rewarding.

Your reaction to the David Lui story was just what I expected, and I'm glad to have taken the trouble to write it out and send it to Dave.

Best to you both,  jdw