

# Other Jobs I Hated

William B. Jensen

*Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati  
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0172*

“When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not.”

*Mark Twain, 1877*

I find as I age that I am increasingly subject to intense mental flashbacks, often dealing with the most trivial and random events of my youth, and I have further discovered that the best way to purge these nagging memories from my brain is to write them down. It gives me a sense of relief not dissimilar to having successfully scanned the contents of an old file folder into my computer and being able to finally throw away its increasingly tattered and fragmented contents, secure in the knowledge they are now safely stored elsewhere and I can quit worrying about their deterioration.

I suspect that all of this may be nothing more than my accidental psychological rediscovery of the so-called “best method” of writing autobiography that Mark Twain claimed to have stumbled upon more than a century ago (1):

*... in 1904 I hit upon the right way to do an Autobiography: Start it at no particular time of your life; wander at your free will all over your life; talk only about the thing which interests you for the moment; drop it the moment its interest threatens to pale, and turn your talk upon the new and more interesting thing that has intruded itself into your mind meantime ... And so I have found the right plan. It makes my labor amusement – mere amusement, play, pastime, and wholly effortless.*

The product of this method in Twain’s case was, of course, a literary classic, even though it has proven, over the years, to be something of a nightmare for those editors charged with arranging the resulting fragments and digressions into a coherent whole.

For obvious reasons Twain’s life is of great interest to large segments of the public, whereas my own life is of no interest to anyone, save myself, my family, and a few indulgent friends. In addition, unlike Twain, my memory is almost exclusively limited to the visual. While I often cannot recall the names of persons from my past or the texture of their conversation, I am always able to call up very detailed mental pictures of their physical appearance and of the buildings and

events which surrounded them, and one of my pleasures in committing these scenes to paper is the attempt to recall as much of this visual detail as possible – a tendency that often tempts me to violate Twain’s injunction to drop a topic before it becomes tedious. And, unhappily, I am also enough of an historian that I cannot further resist a desire to try, whenever possible, to set these memories in some larger historical context, even when that context was largely unknown to me at the time when I first experienced the events in question.

My first attempt to purge these nagging flashbacks occurred roughly a decade ago when I set down my memories of being a science nerd in high school (2). More recently, I have been plagued with flashbacks related to my first job, at age 14, in Pradel’s Drug Store in Wausau, Wisconsin, and I have dutifully committed these to paper as well (3). This last project rekindled yet further memories of other short-term, minimum-wage jobs I had as a teenager or as a young man and the recollection of how unsatisfactory they all were – whence the following. Of course, I suspect that anyone who was not foolish enough to become trapped in the first job that came their way after high school has a similar series of stories to tell. But then I am self-indulgent enough to be interested only in my own tales of “other jobs I hated.”

## **The Post Office**

My first job after leaving the Pradel Drug Store was with the United States Post Office in Wausau, Wisconsin (figure 1), during my senior year of high school. You would think that my negative experience at Pradel’s would have cured me of trying to mix a serious commitment to school with the distractions of a part-time job. Since I neither dated nor owned a car, I had no immediate financial incentive for such a step and the only reason I can imagine for having ignored the lesson of my previous job was the continuing worry over how to finance my college education – a problem that was now looming on the immediate hori-



Figure 1. A circa 1960 postcard of the 1937 building for the Wausau Post Office and Federal Court House as seen from 1st Street. Now listed on the historic registry, the building has recently been converted into condos.

zon. My choice of job was once again dictated by my emulation of my uncle Clyde, who had paid his way through college in Corona, California, by working at the local post office.

This job came my way through the man who operated the physical plant for the building that housed both the post office and the federal court house, and who knew of me through my mother and her job at the public library across the street. I sincerely regret that I can no longer remember his name, but I do remember that he took me on a tour of his domain in the bowels of the building, which dated from 1937 (figure 2), and that the massive heating system, which one looked down upon from a surrounding catwalk, was quite impressive. The various underground levels of the building were anything but oppressive. They were all brightly lit and very clean, with light-brown, ceramic-tile walls. Afterwards I was taken upstairs to meet the postmaster, briefly interviewed, and both finger and palm printed. My appointment, as a temporary "Postal Assistant (Subclerk)," was officially dated the 12th of May, 1966, and the starting wage set at \$2.50 per hour.

As already stated, the post office was located on 1st Street on the east side of town, directly across from the public library, where my mother worked, and hence about 2.5 miles from our home on the southwest side of town. My mother walked this distance twice a day for her job, winter or summer, and I often did the same when walking home from high school, which was located even further away on 7th Street. However, my

new job required that I report at 4:00 am in the morning and work until 7:00 am, after which I would change clothes in the postal locker room and report to high school for the rest of the day. I don't know if every human has his or her own innate natural sleep cycle, or if there are really so-called day and night persons, but if so, then I discovered long ago that my preference for the arms of Morpheus was from 4:00 am until noon. This meant that it had been hard enough for me to get up at 7:00 am to catch the morning bus to high school, and pushing this starting time back to 3:00 am was the best I could manage. Since, by the time I had dressed and had breakfast, it was at least 3:30 am,



Figure 2. A period snapshot of the new post office building as it appeared in the early 1940s, just a few years after its completion.

## OTHER JOBS I HATED

this did not leave me sufficient time to walk the required distance, so I took my trusty three-speed English bike instead.

At 3:30 am in the morning the city streets of Wausau, Wisconsin, were totally deserted, save for an occasional street sweeper or a city road crew, and most of the traffic lights were operating in blink mode. I say most, but not all. About a year earlier, the city had embedded sensors in the roads at the intersections of major streets with minor cross streets so that the lights facing the major thoroughfares remained on green unless tripped by a rare car on the side street. My first night out I encountered such a light in front of Sippel's grocery store on 3rd Avenue. I waited and waited on the side street for the light to turn green in my direction. Finally it dawned on me that I was dealing with one of those new fangled traffic lights and, sure enough, a few feet back from the intersection I spotted a rectangle of newly-laid asphalt in the right-hand lane marking where the sensor was buried. I proceeded to drive back and forth over it with my bike, but to no avail. The combined weight of the bike and myself was simply insufficient to trip the sensor. What was I to do? If I didn't get across the street, I would be late for work and yet it was against the law to cross a street against the traffic lights. In the end, I solved my moral dilemma by moving a block further down to an intersection with no traffic light and crossed there. The fact that, at 3:30 am in the morning, with not a soul or car in sight, it never entered my mind to break the law and cross against the traffic lights, speaks volumes about my naivete at the time. Apparently I still believed that God was lurking somewhere about the quad or, at the very least, some unseen policeman.

About a week later I encountered yet a second obstacle to my transport when a stray German Shepherd began to put in a nightly appearance a few blocks from home and proceeded to chase me, while loudly barking and nipping at my heels. I finally solved this problem by carrying a squirt gun filled with ammonia water, which I used to liberally dose his nose and eyes.

My first job of the day was to assist in unloading the mail trucks that began arriving at the loading dock about 4:30 am. These were not the cute little vans with "US Mail" printed on the side that you see your local mailman driving, but rather unmarked commercial semi-trailers that had privately contracted to haul the out-of-town mail in from various regional sorting centers. These trailers were usually piled to the ceiling with large, heavy, 50-pound, canvas bags containing everything from first-class letters to packages of varying sizes. These we would drag to the opening and toss down to other workers on the dock, who would then load them onto metal carts and drag them into the post

office. The trailers were unventilated and stank of musty canvas, and one soon became overheated from the exertion despite the chill of early morning. In addition, the bags were filthy, having not been cleaned since they were first manufactured sometime back in the 1940s. As a result, by the time the truck was unloaded, you were as filthy as the canvas bags and would have to wash up in the employee's locker room before moving on to the next task.

But the worst part of this job were the nights when some thoughtful person would decide to ship boxes of either live baby chicks or live honey bees. Invariably one of the boxes of chicks would get crushed and one would have to disentangle their mangled bodies from the maze of canvas bags, or a box of bees would burst and they would become scattered among the folds of canvas. At 4:30 am it was still so cold that the bees were essentially dormant. The trick was to locate and dispose of these inert bodies before the sun began to rise and they began to warm up, after which one risked sticking one's hand among the canvas bags and being stung by a very confused and angry member of the order of *hymenoptera*.

After the unloading was finished, I would spend any remaining time sorting, along with three or four other workers, the daily pile of parcel post at a large metal table near the south end of the work area. Indeed, once one passed beyond the wall separating the customer lobby from the postal clerks at the various service windows, the post office was essentially one large room with a 20-foot ceiling, though it was partitioned into various specialized work areas at floor level by the furniture and letter casing boxes. In the center of this space was what appeared to be a very heavy ceiling beam that spanned the entire length of the post office. It extended about eight feet down from the ceiling and was about four feet in thickness. If one looked closely, they could observe that this beam also contained a series of small slits covered with dark glass located at intervals of every four feet or so and set at a height of roughly five feet above its bottom. As it turned out, the beam was hollow and was designed to allow a postal inspector, hidden inside, to view the activities on the sorting floor through the observation slits in order to detect any theft among the workers.

Once I had figured this out, you can understand my further trepidation when I discovered a similar observation slit at the back of each of the bathroom stalls in the employee locker room, placed there apparently for the purpose of catching a thief in the act of sorting his ill-gotten gains. However, closer inspection soon revealed that the glass in these slits had been painted over, apparently at the insistence of the postal workers' union, and possibly in deference to the increasing num-



Figure 3. Posing in my high school graduation robes in the spring of 1966. I did not attend any of the graduation parties that evening because I had to report to my job at the post office at 4:00 am the next morning.

bers of women that were being hired about this time.

Occasionally sorting parcel post could prove interesting. This was certainly the case one Saturday afternoon when a package, addressed to a farmer outside of Ringo, burst open on being dumped onto the sorting table, only to reveal that it contained a large quantity of nudist literature. This excited considerable interest among the older men at the table. Whether the same was true of the postal inspector in the overhead beam, I do not know, though I am certain that, despite his watchful eye, some of the scattered nudist literature failed to make it into the bin for repackaging.

As it turns out, my postal adventures pale in comparison to those of my uncle. Like myself, he recalls encounters with mashed baby chicks and burst boxes of semi-conscious honey bees, but is able to add to this list escaped lady bugs purchased to control aphid infestations in the orange groves of southern California, and escaped ants from a broken ant farm that was being mailed to some local children by their thoughtful grandparents. Even more curious was the reeking box of dead owls addressed to the local hospital. Apparently they had originally been frozen for transport but had accidentally been sent to the wrong city. By the time they were rerouted back to Corona they had done more than just thaw out. Why the local hospital needed dead owls remains unexplained. And, finally,

there was the incident of the box with the damaged corner that began leaking sand onto the sorting table – or at least they thought it was sand until someone read the shipping label and discovered that it had been mailed by a crematorium. They poured as much “sand” as possible back through the hole, scotch taped it shut, and delivered the package to the unsuspecting recipient. And these tales do not include my uncle’s adventures actually delivering the mail itself, an aspect of the postal enterprise that I was happily spared.

My job at the post office overlapped with my final semester of high school by only a month, though in retrospect it seemed like forever. Even though I was working only 18-20 hours per week and bringing home a salary of \$30-\$42 per week after taxes, I found the early morning schedule exhausting and resented having to go to bed each evening by 8:00 pm. And so, after graduation in early June (figure 3), I continued in the job for only another two months before finally submitting my resignation in late July. The acceptance form, dated 25 July 1966, listed the reason for my resignation as “funds for his education no longer required from Post Office employment, now met by scholarships.”

Throughout high school I had jokingly claimed that I wanted to attend either Oxford or Cambridge University, but the economic reality was such that, starting in the fall of 1966, I would instead be attending the local two-year campus of the Marathon County Extension Center for the University of Wisconsin, which was located about five blocks from my home. Living at home saved the cost of both meals and rent and, with a tuition of only \$105 per semester, the projected expenses were well within my means. And, I would hasten to add, after more than 40 years in academia, I can truly say that I have no complaints about the education I received there. It may have lacked the prestige and historical glamor of Oxford or Cambridge, but it was more than competitive when it came to both its quality and quantity. Also, by early June the Extension Center had awarded me a \$450 tuition remission scholarship for the upcoming academic year and I had also collected another \$250 scholarship from the local American Legion Post. These were more than adequate to meet my needs for the near future and thus make possible my escape from the post office that July. But my most intense memory of this entire episode was how wonderfully delicious it felt to sleep until noon the day after my resignation took effect, with neither the demands of school nor job to vex my dreams.

### **The Brokaw Paper Mill**

My second job after leaving the Pradel Drug Store was as a lab technician with the Brokaw Paper Mill (figure

## OTHER JOBS I HATED



Figure 4. The Brokaw Paper Mill and the village of Brokaw as they appeared in 1903. By my day an eclectic menagerie of additional structures had sprung up between the original buildings and the road in front of the houses in the background.

4) during my second year of college at the local University Extension Center. This job came my way via a chemical engineer by the name of Chuck Soukup, who worked at the mill and who was also a member of the local Mormon congregation and the husband of Beth Soukup, whom I mentioned earlier in connection with my brief flirtation with the world of pharmacy. The only catch was that the paper mill, as indicated by its name, was not located in Wausau proper but rather in the village of Brokaw, about seven miles north of Wausau. As already stated, I possessed neither a driver's license nor a car and the required daily commute was well beyond the limits of my English three-speed bike, especially when in the grip of a cold Wisconsin winter. So what was to be done? Fortunately both Soukup and the mill proved to be highly accommodating.

I was, for example, given the freedom to determine how many hours a week I would work, up to a prescribed maximum, as well as the times at which I would work, so as to minimize any conflicts with my college courses. Not unexpectedly, this meant that I would often have to choose to work weekday evenings and Saturdays, and this, in turn, further meant that I would often be alone in the laboratory. Because both common sense and safety concerns dictated that it was best that a second person should also be present in case of an accident, the mill agreed to split the job and to hire a second technician to work with me and, because this person not only had to match his hours with mine, but also provide me with a source of transportation, they further agreed, at my suggestion, to hire my close friend Bob Vorwalske (figure 5), whom I had known since the third grade.

As the only child of older, doting, middle-class parents, Bob was often provided with financial benefits and gifts well beyond my wildest imagining and thus became, on acquiring his driver's license during his junior year of high school, the proud owner of a brand-new, bright blue, Volkswagen beetle and the sole source of transportation for our immediate group of teenage friends. This included, in addition to myself and Bob, an electronics nut named Blair Peshak, whom I had also known since the third grade; Kim Walters, who was Bob's first cousin and a decent classical violinist; and a neighbor of Bob's by the name of James



Figure 5. Bob Vorwalske as he appeared in 1966.

Degner, who had a fine Irish tenor singing voice which he employed exclusively for the purpose of repeatedly performing the lyrics to an old Vernon Dahlhart tune from the 1920s entitled “The Prisoner’s Song,” with special emphasis on the refrain:

*If I had the wings of an angel,  
over these prison walls I would fly.  
I would fly to the arms of my darling,  
And there I’d be willing to die.*

Thus it was that, during the late fall and winter of 1967/1968, we found ourselves most weekdays in Bob’s Volkswagen speeding up old Highway 51 to Brokaw, Wisconsin, in the blackness of early evening (for darkness came early in Wisconsin once daylight savings time ceased in late October). In my memory all of these commutes are frozen, both metaphorically and literally, in the frigid cold of a late Wisconsin January. Though certainly an improvement over my bicycle, the original Volkswagen beetle was not exactly known for the effectiveness of its heating system. The absence of a hot motor in the front of the car meant that the winter winds came whistling through its empty front trunk and out every seam and crack in the dash board. And, of course, the window defrosters were also not the best known to mankind and Bob often found himself hunched over the steering wheel trying to make out the road through a narrow slit in the encroaching window frost.

By the time we arrived at the mill it would be pitch dark and all that was visible were the bright lights in the parking lot and those attached to the various smoke stacks, as well as the clouds of white steam that seem to leak from every crack and chimney of the aging plant, as though it was emitting its own winter breath in imitation of our own. Curiously, though I remember the mill with great vividness, I have utterly no recollection of the village of Brokaw itself. This is perhaps not surprising since it was really nothing more than just a few, small, worker’s bungalows that had sprung up around the mill after its founding in 1899. As of 2012, it consisted of less than 150 houses and had a population of only 251.

The Brokaw mill was one of three paper mills located on the Wisconsin River within a few miles of Wausau. Six miles to the south was the Marathon Paper Mill in the village of Rothschild, which dated from 1909, and 17 miles to the southwest was the Mosinee Paper Mill in the town of Mosinee, which dated from 1910. All three mills made paper from wood pulp. Wood consists of cellulose fibers dispersed in a matrix of a phenolic-based resin or polymer known as lignin and the cellulose must be separated from the lignin

before it can be made into a high quality paper – the more complete the separation, the less prone the resulting paper to browning and embrittlement with the passage of time. In the 1960s the most common technology used for this purpose was chemical in nature and was known as the sulfite process because it employed various sulfite and/or bisulfite salts to convert the lignin into a separable product known as lignin sulfonate.

Each mill seems to have had its own distinctive odor that could be smelled for miles when the wind was just right. The mill in Mosinee, for example, which used an alternative delignification process known as the kraft or sulfate process, always seemed to me to smell like bad sauerkraut, whereas the mill in Rothschild smelled of vanillin, the active ingredient in vanilla extract. This was because, starting in the late 1920s, the mill had established a research laboratory and subsidiary company, known as Marathon Chemicals, for the express purpose of discovering and developing new commercial uses for the lignin sulfonate by-product produced by the sulfite process. Originally this had been thrown away by discharging it directly into the Wisconsin River in the form of a waste stream known as brown liquor. One of these uses was a new process for the synthesis of vanillin developed by a British-born chemical engineer named F. J. Zimmerman. Under the name of Salvo Chemical Co., a small plant for its production was built next to the paper mill proper and, by 1940, it was producing 70% of the vanillin used in the United States. Though the odor of the vanillin was strong enough to mask the odor from the mill itself, in high concentrations it could be quite oppressive, particularly on a hot, humid, Wisconsin summer day, and not nearly as pleasant as the odor emitted from the bottle of vanilla extract found in your mother’s kitchen cabinet.

As for the odor of the Brokaw mill, the only thing that comes to mind is the smell of a wet dog. And this odor stuck to everything, including your clothes and hair. As a consequence, Bob and I wore a special set of old clothes to work, which our mothers would wash every few days so that the odor wouldn’t contaminate our homes, and we also had to wash our hair each evening before going to bed. Indeed, I can recall my younger sister complaining of how bad I smelled whenever I returned home from the mill.

The laboratory at the mill was located just off the “beater” room. This was a massive multi-storied space located on top of an enormous tank containing pulp slurry that was being continuously agitated by huge paddles in order to prevent settling. The room had numerous openings in the floor through which the technicians could take test samples and add dyes, fillers, and other ingredients before the slurry was fed into the

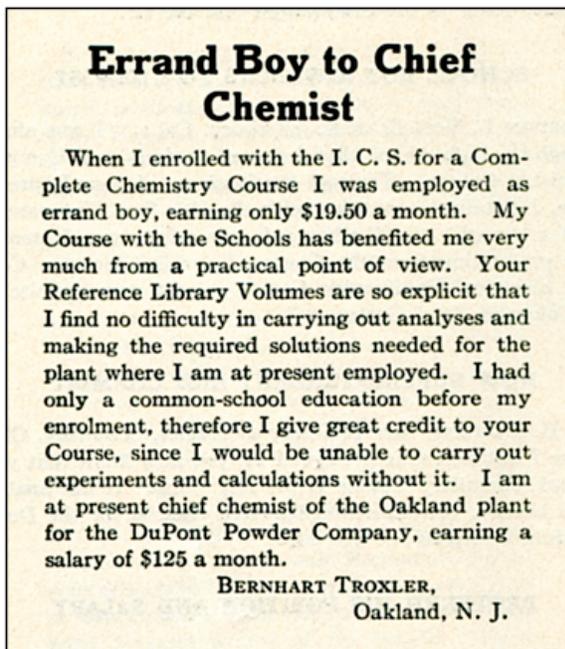


Figure 6. A typical testimonial for the chemistry course offered by the International Correspondence School (I.C.S.) of Scranton, Pennsylvania.

paper machines next door, where it was squeezed, pressed, dried, and collected into massive rolls of finished product. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the laboratory was a single story affair that had been constructed along one wall within the beater room, since the ceiling of the latter was much higher than the roof of the lab itself.

The laboratory space was divided into three sections, each separated from the others by floor to ceiling wood and glass partitions typical of those found in offices dating from the 1930s. The southern-most section contained the chemical laboratory, the center section the pulp and paper testing facilities, and the northern-most section the offices for the chemical engineers. The chemical laboratory, in turn, contained two, circa-1930, lab benches, a single antique 3 x 3 x 12 foot wooden fume hood of the same vintage and of dubious reliability, and two smaller side rooms, one of which served as a stock room and the other as a furnace room in which resided a huge and very intimidating gas-fired muffle furnace. That portion of the central section devoted to pulp testing consisted of a single bench-sink combination extending the length of the outer wall on which resided numerous devices for mechanically squeezing and otherwise manipulating samples of the pulp slurry taken at periodic intervals from the beater room in order to approximate how the slurry would behave on being fed into the paper ma-

chines. Along the opposite wall was a smaller room that was both temperature and humidity controlled and which housed various devices for testing the mechanical strength and optical opacity of the finished paper products.

There were also at least two older chemists working in the lab, who functioned as my direct supervisors, though I use the term “chemist” advisedly, as I doubt that either had college degrees in chemistry and I know that at least one had been hired 20 years earlier directly out of high school. At best they may have completed a mail order course in chemistry, like those offered for many years to prospective “industrial chemists” by the International Correspondence Schools of Scranton Pennsylvania (figure 6). In reality, these men functioned, like myself and Bob, as mere laboratory technicians, since the people who really ran the show were the chemical engineers in the office at the far end of the lab complex.

The first job we were assigned was to clean and organize the laboratory stock room – a task which we tackled with great gusto, only to be pulled aside after 20 minutes and told that we were working too fast. The job, we were informed, was intended to occupy us for the entire afternoon and, at the rate we were going, we would instead be finished in less than an hour. Since I loved to handle laboratory glassware and bottles of chemicals, this task was pleasant. The same, however, cannot be said of a later job we were assigned, which involved cleaning out a large storage room used by the engineers that was located elsewhere in the mill. This was filled with boxes of old technical reports, massive spools of old circular temperature-chart readouts held together with bailing wire, and 50- or 60-pound chunks of some dark-brown, evil-looking, material that smelled like creosote, and whose exact nature and origin were never explained to us.

Initially many of our assigned tasks were truly chemical, such as preparing standard solutions for titrations, and this led to my only laboratory accident when I suddenly got a mouth full of potassium permanganate solution that I was mouth pipetting. Luckily I was able to spit it out before swallowing any, but for more than a week my mouth felt like it had been cauterized inside and I could not taste anything. However, as time went on, we were assigned more and more to the task of paper testing in the humidity controlled room in the central section of the lab complex, especially if we worked on weekends when the senior chemists were not present. This involved cutting the sample sheets of paper to be tested into strips of a prescribed width using a paper cutter and then measuring, by means of various mechanical instruments, how much force was required to either tear the strips or to punch holes in

them. We would do hundreds of samples each work session and dutifully enter the readouts in tally sheets for the engineers to evaluate. This was, to say the least, not just tedious, but truly soul numbing – which no doubt accounts for why the senior chemists so often assigned it to us.

As with my earlier job at the Pradel Drug Store, the problem of job boredom began to play an increasing role in our actions. Indeed, I recall that one evening, when Bob and I were working alone, we became so bored that we prepared a large batch of nitrogen triiodide and spread it on the floor around the work space for one of the senior chemists (who, in all fairness, was prone to practical jokes himself). This was a typical piece of ill-conceived adolescent humor and, after returning home that evening, I spent a restless night worrying that our little prank might end up inducing a heart attack in the old guy when, the next morning, he suddenly found the floor around him exploding in loud pops of violet vapor.

The one task in the laboratory we were never allowed to perform was testing the pulp samples taken at periodic intervals from the beater room. A senior technician would drop a red, gallon-size, plastic bucket on a rope into one of the openings in the floor and draw up a sample. This was then taken to the pulp bench and a handful placed in a device that would squeeze it and measure how much water came out. This was necessary in order to approximate how much water would be released when the pulp slurry was fed into the paper machines. Too much water and one risked flooding the machine floor. After performing this test, the technician would pour both the handful of pulp used in the test and the unused portion still in the sample bucket down the sink.

By now it should be obvious that our lab did not deal in research and development but was primarily concerned with monitoring and maintaining the day to day operation of the mill. Nevertheless, while I was there, one of the engineers took notice of how this test was performed and calculated that, over the years, we had dumped a substantial quantity of useable pulp slurry down the sink. As a result, the technician was ordered, from then on, to return the unused portion of the pulp sample to the beater room and to pour it back into the bulk slurry tank. Unfortunately the first time he did this, he accidentally dropped the bucket into the tank and it was fed out into the adjacent room, where it became jammed in one of the paper machines, thus requiring that operations be shut down for a day in order to fish it out. That, to the best of my knowledge, was both the beginning and the end of research and development at the Brokaw Paper Mill.

Physically the mill was a random labyrinth of

buildings and towers of differing ages and functions and I don't think I ever figured out how it all fit together. I was taken on a tour when I was first hired and recall being shown the paper and rolling machines and having to go up a horrible contraption that consisted of tiny alternating footholds and handholds arranged on what was essentially a vertical conveyor belt. But what sticks out most in my memory was the visit to the bleach room. Here I met a poor, introverted technician with plastic, black-rim glasses held together with white adhesive tape. In addition to himself, the rather tiny, windowless room that was his domain contained a small table with a stand and a pair of burettes for titration, a few beakers and flasks, and several tanks of chlorine gas. In the center of its floor was an open manhole that looked directly down into the massive tank of bleach solution below and from which the technician would, from time to time, take a sample in order to determine its concentration. But what gave the entire scene its most memorable aspect was the fact that both the room and the light coming from the hole in the floor were a yellow red color. No doubt this was to inhibit the photochemical decomposition of the bleach solution, which is sensitive to blue and ultraviolet light, but it also gave the impression that one had just entered Dante's Inferno, save that it reeked of chlorine gas rather than sulfur.

On another occasion I was taken by Chuck and some of the other engineers to see the mill's new Cope-land fluidized bed reactor. This was designed to produce magnesium oxide and sulfur dioxide through air oxidation of the spent magnesium lignosulfonate liquor left after separating the pulp cellulose from its lignin matrix. The magnesium oxide produced was then reacted with both water and the expelled sulfur dioxide to regenerate the magnesium sulfite used in the initial delignification process. The result was essentially a closed system that recirculated the chemicals used in the sulfite process rather than dumping them into the river and was thus a significant contribution to pollution abatement. It was a beautiful stainless-steel reaction chamber that was several stories in height. They had just finished a test-run and we were able to crawl inside by means of a small porthole near floor level and found the interior lined with white magnesium oxide and the floor covered in magnesium oxide pellets that were still slightly warm. However, the interior made me feel extremely claustrophobic and I could not help but imagine what would happen if someone trapped us inside by accidentally closing the porthole.

At least once, Bob and I were able to explore on our own. One Saturday we decided to do a marathon work session extending from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm.

## OTHER JOBS I HATED

This meant that we would have to eat lunch in the lab and we had been told that there were some pop, soup and sandwich dispensers on one of the lower floors. Come noon, we went looking for them and finally ended up in what must of been the original building for the mill since it looked directly out onto the Wisconsin River and several incrustated, antique waste pipes that were languidly discharging a viscous black goo directly into the water while emitting little puffs of steam in the process. But the most unnerving of our discoveries was a down stair case set into the floor that became submerged after a few steps in a pool of dark water, thus hinting at the existence of long forgotten nether regions. All of this, of course, was long before it became a Hollywood cliché to have the good guys confront the bad guys in a violent shootout set in the cavernous remains of some deserted factory, but when this movie trend finally materialized, we were well prepared to appreciate its inherent creepiness.

I am uncertain what motivated me to take this job in the first place, as I did not make that much money. A surviving weekly pay stub shows that, for the week in question, I had managed to clock only 12 hours for a grand total, at \$2.42 per hour, of \$23.94 after taxes. I think I was flattered to have been asked and was attracted by both its inherent flexibility and the fact that, unlike the case with the drug store, it was truly a job dealing with chemistry. My letter of appointment explicitly indicated that the job was only temporary and I think I had lost interest by the spring of 1968 and dropped out, though I also seem to recall that Bob continued on his own through the end of that summer, when we were both scheduled to transfer to Madison for our junior year of college.

The Wisconsin paper mills were the inheritors of the once proud Wisconsin lumber industry. They rose to prominence in the early 20th century only after the large trees of the virgin forest, used to make lumber, were largely depleted and only the smaller secondary growth, suitable for pulping, remained. Like most American industries, in recent decades the paper industry has been subject to repeated buyouts and amalgamations by ever larger national and international corporations. When I worked there, the Brokaw Mill was actually owned by a firm known as Wausau Papers and in 1997 this company also became associated with the mill at Mosinee. In 2011 Wausau Papers sold the Brokaw Mill to Neenah Paper, and in March of that year the new buyer decided to close the site after 112 years of continuous operation. At last report, the abandoned mill site had been sold to a developer. Even the innovative Marathon Chemical Corporation and the Rothschild-based vanillin plant are gone. After passing through several new owners, the company was acquired in

1990 by a Norwegian-based international corporation known as Borregaard LignoTech. Long before this, however, vanillin production from lignin waste had ceased in the United States, since it could no longer commercially compete with a newer synthetic procedure based on petrochemicals.

### North Central Heating

The Post Office and the Brokaw Paper Mill hardly exhaust my list of temporary, minimum wage jobs. During the Xmas break of 1966/1967, for example, I was employed for a week as a receptionist for North Central Heating. This local Wausau business was located just off of 6th street in a turn-of-the-century building and was owned and operated by the father of one of my high-school friends by the name of James Wicke (figure 7), though, for some reason, we always called him Wicke rather than Jim. The Wickes lived in a ranch-style house on Pied Piper Lane on the southeast side of town near the airport. Though Wicke had an older married sister, by the time I knew him he was the only child still living at home with parents who were considerably older than my own, and he had assumed something of the aura of a privileged only child. His bedroom, for example, occupied the entire second floor of the house and was filled with his collection of jazz and big-band records and his collection of books on military history and political caricature. His domain also extended to most of the basement, which housed his mineral collection, a lab bench complete with a commercially produced kit for chemically testing minerals (which I dearly coveted), and an old upright piano



Figure 7. James Wicke as he appeared in 1965.



Figure 8. An example of an illustration I did for one of Wicke's newspaper columns dealing with an exposé of George Lincoln Rockwell and the American Nazi Party.

on which he would pound out, on request, his version of Scott Joplin's famous "Maple Leaf Rag."

After high school, Wicke continued on with me at the Marathon County Extension Center and we would later be roommates during my first year at the main campus in Madison. Either during his last year of high school or his first year of college, his parents gave him a vintage, 1950s, two-tone, blue and white, Pontiac convertible with large tail fins and white-wall tires in which we would take weekend day trips to either Green Bay or Madison in order to visit used books stores, since by our first year of college we had both begun to seriously collect books. During this year he also wrote an occasional opinion/review column for the college newspaper which I illustrated with cartoons and caricatures (figures 8-9) and for which we were both given journalism awards.

There was, however, one serious defect in Wicke's character and that was his fascination with extremist political movements. In high school he became an outspoken advocate of Barry Goldwater's bid for President of the United States and even managed to get a group of us arrested for staging an unauthorized Friday-night parade through downtown Wausau in support of his candidate. He also became an avid col-

lector of Ku Klux Klan literature, and I remember his excitement when it was announced that George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder of the American Nazi Party, had been assassinated in a Virginia parking lot.

In college Wicke did a complete 180 degree flip and by the time I moved to Madison he had become both an avid Marxist and a Black Studies major. That's right, your eyes have not deceived you. He actually decided to major in Black Studies! As you may well imagine, I have since wondered whether this extreme about-face was some kind of bizarre penance for past political sins. He also proceeded to decorate our room with African art and large posters of such political radicals as Malcolm X and Che Guevara. Indeed, I can recall returning from campus one day to find him in a tither. While I was gone, two Mormon missionaries had shown up to inquire about my lack of church attendance. Based on their conservative haircuts, their dark suits, white shirts, ties, and wing-tip shoes, as well as their obvious disapproval of his decor, Wicke had become convinced that they were actually FBI agents come to spy on him.

By the end of the year we had parted company for good, in large part because of my refusal to respect his extremist views and because, from the standpoint of his newly acquired political "religion", this refusal to become part of the "solution" automatically meant that I was part of the problem. In retrospect I regret this development since, whatever else he may have been, Wicke was always an interesting and stimulating companion, with a wicked sense of humor and a broad range of historical and cultural interests. When I last heard of him, more than 30 years ago, he was living in Chicago and spending his weekends on street corners passing out political pamphlets for the Communist Party.

But to return to Wausau, Wisconsin, during the winter of 1966/1967. It seems that the elder Wicke's secretary had quit her job at the heating company shortly before Xmas and he felt that it would be impossible to find a permanent replacement until sometime after New Years. As a family friend and college student on holiday break, I was asked if I would be willing to temporarily take her place. My primary duty was to take phone messages and to deal with the nonexistent walk-in customers when Mr. Wicke was out of the store on sales and service calls. This was hardly demanding work and most of my time was actually spent reading H. P. Lovecraft horror stories. Desperate to better utilize his short-term employee, and knowing of my work illustrating his son's column in the college newspaper, Mr. Wicke eventually set me the task of designing several cartoon-based ads for his business. I believe that several of these were actually printed in the city newspaper, though I find, for some reason, that

I do not have copies in my files.

The Xmas holidays were not exactly a boom period for selling furnaces and air conditioners. The main reason for staying open was to deal with the service calls. Having your furnace quit in the midst of a freezing Wisconsin winter was no laughing matter and Mr. Wicke felt obligated to insure that this did not happen to any of his loyal customers. Indeed, I remember one of these service calls in great detail. It came in about 5:30 pm, just before closing time, from a farm in the wilds of Stettin to the west of Wausau. Since Mr. Wicke knew that it would be dark by the time he arrived at the farm house and he was uncertain whether the county roads had been properly plowed, he asked me to accompany him, no doubt as extra muscle power should he have the misfortune to become stuck in a snow drift.

As it turned out, the snow plows had done their job and I soon found myself as a passenger, not in a drafty Volkswagen, but in a well heated luxury Cadillac cautiously moving down narrow county roads. For much of the trip the only thing visible in the beams of the headlights were the enormous piles of snow left by the plows on either side of the road. These were often taller than the car itself and, on the few occasions when we could see over them, only endless flat fields of snow were visible stretching to the horizon, which was itself marked only by the distant lights of an occasional farm.

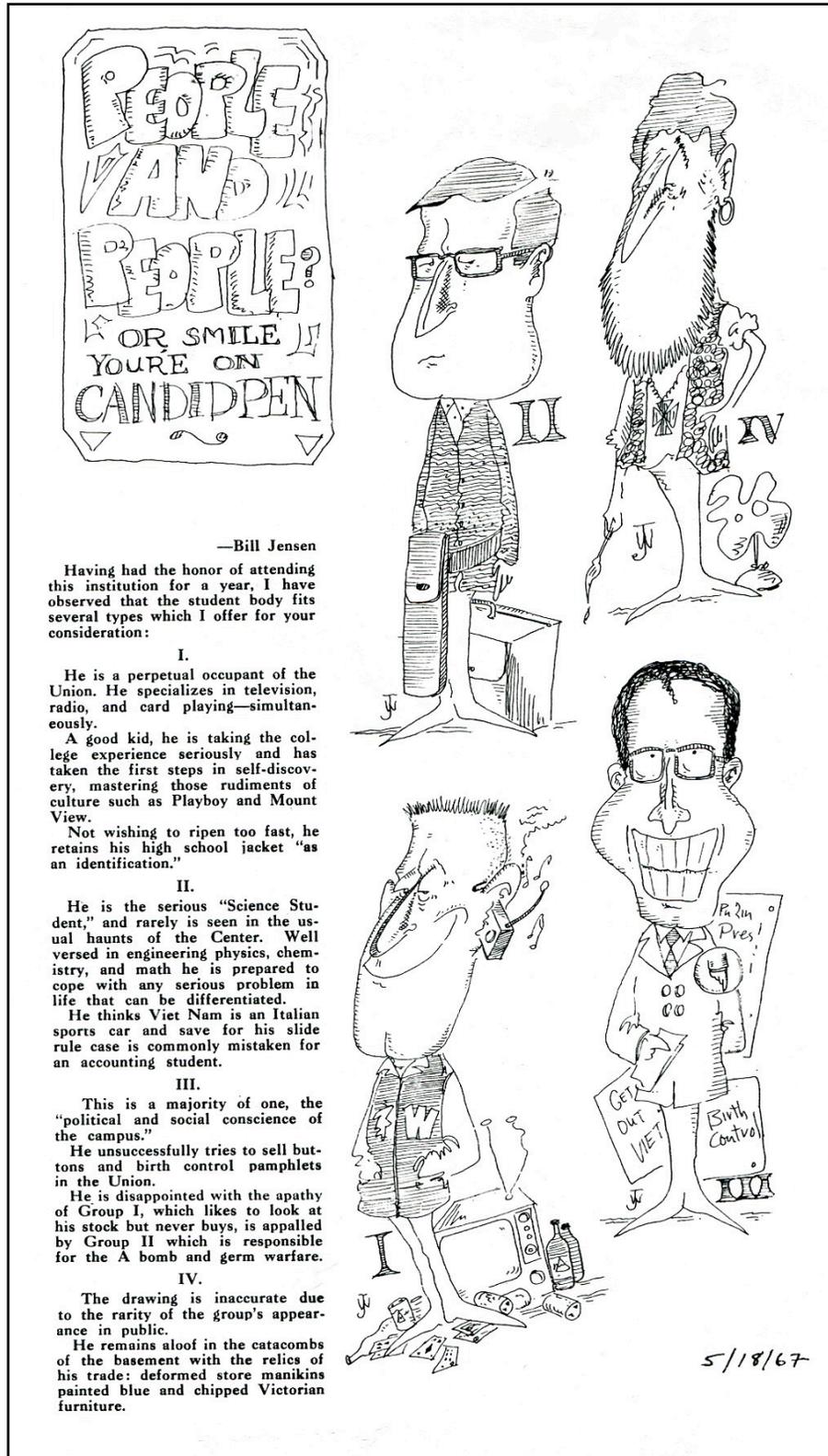


Figure 9. A cartoon satire which I did for the college newspaper my freshman year. Wicke is caricatured as Type III. Apparently he forgave me, since we later became roommates after my move to Madison.

It was a bitterly cold, cloudless January night and the humidity was so low that the stars and moon shone with unusual brilliance and the only audible sound was the crisp crunch of the car's tires on the thin layer of compacted snow left by the plows.

When we finally arrived at the farm house, around 6:30 pm, the family, bundled in their winter coats, was just finishing supper. I remember the palpable sense of gratitude when we appeared out of the darkness of the night to rescue them and the surprise of the teenage daughter, who recognized me from high school, though we had not personally known one another. Of course, I knew nothing about repairing furnaces, so I was quickly relegated to the job of holding the flash light and passing tools to Mr. Wicke. After about 20 minutes of tinkering, he got the furnace working again and, mission accomplished, we once more disappeared into the blackness of the January night. Though most would dismiss this episode as mundane in the extreme and hardly worth recording, it was, for some reason, strangely surreal and I am still surprised at the intensity with which I am able to recall its tiniest details after more than 40 years. Perhaps it is mute testimony to the ability of a cold January night to hyperstimulate the human senses.

A surviving pay stub indicates that my week-long adventure working for North Central Heating earned me a total of \$22.50 after taxes.

### The Wausau Sign Company

My final part-time job occurred in the summer of 1969, between my junior and senior year at Madison, when I worked for the Wausau Sign Company, which had moved from its original location on North 2nd Avenue to newer accommodations on South 15th Avenue, a few blocks from our house. My father (figure 10) had been half owner of the original business, but had sold out his interest several years earlier in order to form his own company under the name of "Jensigns" – a disastrous decision which soon ended in a descent into debt and alcoholism. However, that summer he was in one of his increasingly brief periods of sobriety and had gone to work for his former partner, Mac Madison. Indeed, since he was the only trained sign painter working for the company, he was paid the highest wage. Mac, as usual, handled the financial accounts and the glassblowing required for the increasingly rare demand for neon signs, and Joe Cole did most of the routine construction and mechanical work.

In previous years I had used my cartooning skills to help my father design and paint temporary window signs in tempera, mostly for seasonal specials sponsored by various car dealers in town, and he somehow

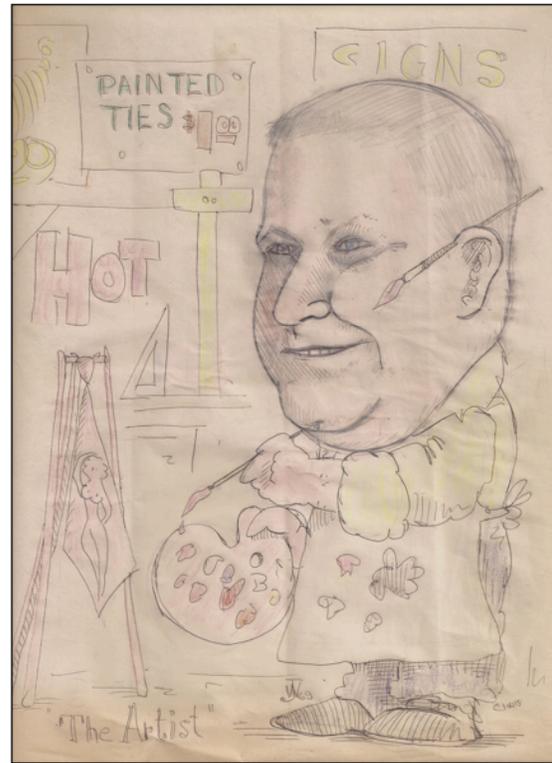


Figure 10. A caricature of my father, William Wickman Jensen (1927-1974), which I did around the time that I worked with him at the Wausau Sign Company. Unhappily the paper I used has not only darkened with time but has apparently sustained some water damage.

got it into his head that I was a competent sign painter. He was obviously quite proud that I was working with him and that I was finally doing something he could understand and appreciate. As a result, he insisted that Mac pay me a wage substantially above the minimum required by law.

This, however, proved to be a huge mistake. Though I excelled at cartoons, doodles, and quick sketches, I lacked the patience and skills to do precision layout work. I had known this since 8th grade when I had taken a course in mechanical drawing. If ever there was an anal retentive subject, this was it. The entire semester was spent drawing two-dimensional "orthographic" projections of various arrangements of wooden blocks and metal machine parts. Every aspect of the process had to be done by the book, from how we fastened the paper to our drafting boards and positioned our arms, to always rotating our No. 4 pencils when drawing lines so that they would wear evenly on all sides. But try as I might, there was always something unfinished and frayed about my final product and, to my great disappointment, I received a B in the course rather than my anticipated A.

## OTHER JOBS I HATED

A second piece of evidence appeared the next year when I took “art” for the last time in 9th grade. The instructor was named Crawford and I remember that he was partial to plaid suit jackets and bow ties, and that he wore his hair in a military-style buzz cut – a somewhat unusual choice for someone in the arts. Though my drawings and designs of buildings and other inanimate objects were creative enough to earn me an A for the year, Crawford was not equally enthusiastic about my drawings of people and complained to me that everything I drew looked like a cartoon. I took the hint and never took another art course. That summer Crawford happened to walk by our house while I was sitting on the front porch and we had a brief, but interesting, conversation during which he informed me that he had resigned his teaching position at John Muir Junior High School in order to take a job as curator of a small art gallery somewhere in the wilds of Texas, where, I assume, his buzz-cut proved to be less of an anomaly.

The first hint that I was in over my head at the sign company came when I was assigned the job of laying out the pattern for a sign to be painted on the side of a panel truck. This was done using a pencil, yard stick, and T-square on an enormous 4 x 8 foot sheet of brown paper. Once the letters were penciled in, their outlines were traced using a small tool with a toothed wheel that left punctures in the paper every few millimeters. The resulting “stencil” was then taped to the side of the truck and liberally doused with chalk powder using a powder puff in order to create a temporary guide for my father to follow when he did the actual painting. Somehow I managed to mismeasure things with the result that my letters, due to an increasing lack

of space, became thinner and thinner and more and more closely spaced as one read from left to right.

Nor was my second assignment a great success. This involved using a small hand-held electric jig saw to cut out 40 large cursive letters that my father had laid out on sheets of inch-thick plywood. My control of the saw was less than perfect and the resulting hesitations and unaccountable meanderings in and out of the lines meant that I had to spend hours afterwards with a file and sandpaper in order to achieve the desired smooth curves.

My employment was finally terminated by an accident. I was asked to fetch something from a storage bin that had been mounted near the ceiling directly above a large cylindrical steel tank. I foolishly placed a metal ladder against the curve of the tank and started up, only to have the ladder suddenly slip sideways. I came crashing to the cement floor and hit the back of my head rather violently against the side of the tank in the process. I recall my father being very upset but, as things turned out, I was only temporarily stunned and soon recovered. In any case, the tank seems to have finally knocked some sense into me and I quit the next day, vowing to never again take another temporary job unless forced by truly dire economic circumstances.

### References and Notes

1. C. Neider, Ed., *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Harper: New York, NY, 1959, p. xi.
2. W. B. Jensen, “Remembering High School Chemistry,” Cincinnati, OH, 2003. Google “W. B. Jensen.”
3. W. B. Jensen, “My Drug Store Days,” Cincinnati, OH, 2012. Google “W. B. Jensen.”