

EDITORIAL

with Hartley Coles

Checks and balances

It's hard to believe - almost shirt sleeve weather at the tail end of November. We used to call it Indian Summer, a time proverbially set aside for the First Nation people to finish preparing for winter, after the first snowfall. Now we're already into the last month of 1998, and the weatherman still hasn't seen any large concentrations of cold heading our way.

Nevertheless, it will come, prepared or not. And still the swamps and steams in this area are far from being full of water long considered a criteria before winter can set in. In fact, some look like cracked deserts gasping for life saving moisture.

The low water tables are drying well up, threatening farmers who must water livestock. This summer's drought shows just how dependent we are on rain to provide us with ample moisture. Some parts of Ontario are not affected by the drought, have had copious rain, but there seems to be a band of little or no rain areas, stretching from Windsor to east of Toronto in which this neck of the woods is part.

The corn crop, a staple, was hit hard by the drought and farmers found prices for corn were at the lowest level in years. It has been a double whammy for small farmers who also relied on raising pigs for income. Although retail prices are still at high levels for pork, farmers are finding they lose money when it comes to marketing their pork. Despite high retail prices the lower prices producers are receiving suggests the people in the middle - pork processors - are pocketing big profits while farmers are forced to destroy their pigs so they won't lose their shirts.

Small producers are blaming the huge pig farms for destroying their market. It's a sample of laissez-fair capitalism at its worst, threatening the future of the family farm in the area as well as all of Canada.

Unless these huge conglomerates are subject to some checks they may one day control our food supply. When that happens they're be able to set prices as they like as they are now with pork.

Annoying calls

Is there anything more annoying than a phone call just as you are eating dinner (or supper, as some say) and the caller turns out to be someone from some charitable cause? It is doubly annoying when the charity, or supposed charity, is one you've never heard of.

This writer's first impulse is to say "stuff it," because the aggravation is compounded by the thought of the indigestion you're going to get with the constant ringing of the phone. Or better still, hang up.

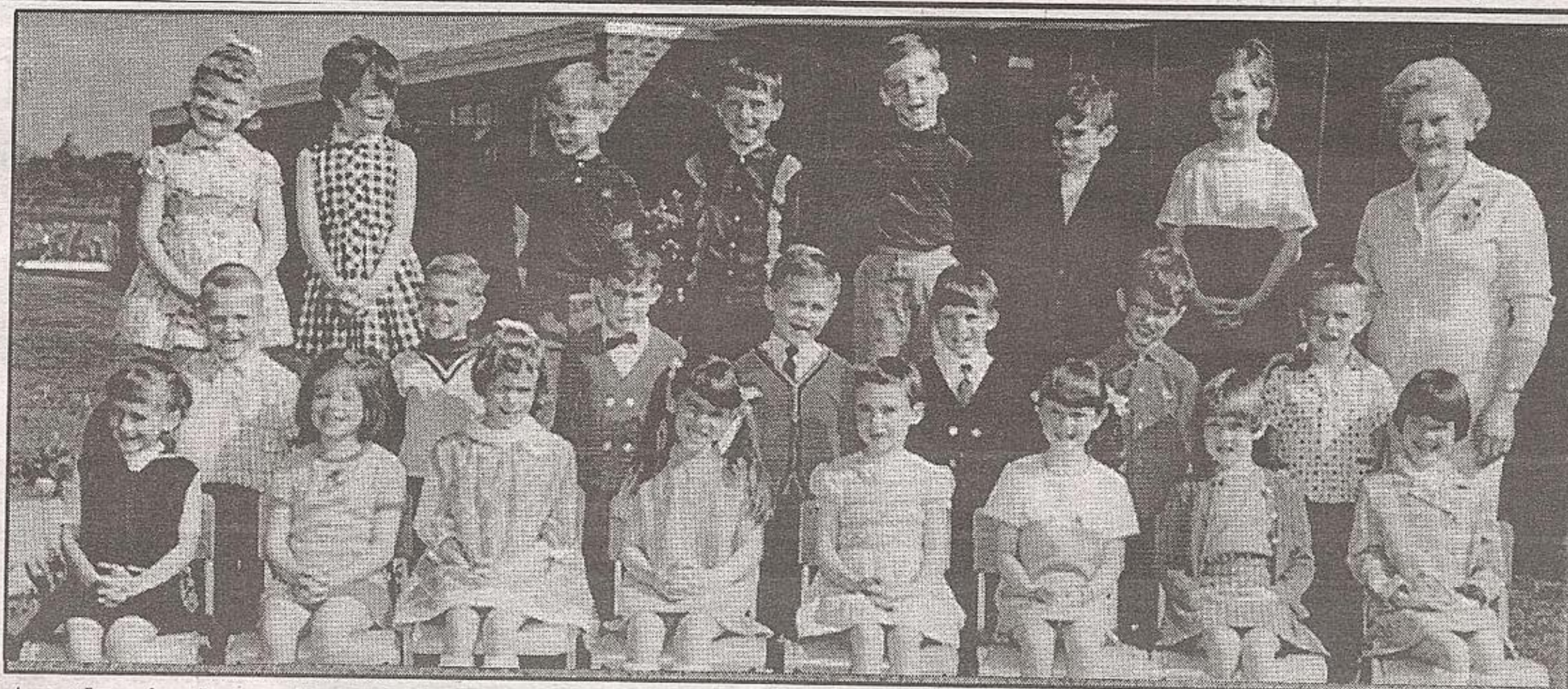
The aggravation is compounded when the caller says they will send someone out right away to collect the money you've donated, if you have. If any charity can afford to send someone out to collect your donation, someone to whom they have to pay mileage, then obviously the amount of money collected is going to be considerably less.

And, of course, around the Christmas holiday season the drive to collect money gathers steam with the knowledge that "guilt trips" increase as the season progresses. Since it is close to the end of the year there's the added knowledge that income tax exemptions for charitable giving are quite generous.

I'm not suggesting that charities who use the phone for fund-raising should quit. Many of them are worthy causes. Like others I'm prepared to give where it's needed. But surely they should impress on their fund raisers the need for courtesy and the fact they are asking for money, not preying on victims.

Some of the callers can be quite belligerent when they get a negative response and try to lay a guilt trip on the call recipient. It should only increase the determination to avoid that charity.

Maybe the best policy for these phone calls is to hang up on them when you're not familiar with them or it is an outside appeal. That will certainly give them the message that you don't want to be bothered.



Another in the series of photos of the Grade 1 classes of Kathleen (Kay) Alger, who now resides in British Columbia. Back Row: L to R, Patti Gordon, Frances Cunningham, Peter McKeown, Timothy Atkinson, Chris Marchment, Glenn Owen, Michelle Fields, Mrs. Alger. Middle Row: Ricky Lott, Donny Woodward, Donald Brown, Kevin Parker, Stephen Lumbers, Gary Bousefield, Howard Hatt. Front row: Darlene Roach, Dawnne Streets, Karen Paton, Jeannette Foster, Brenda Harding, Tracey Tyler, Kathy Brown, Carol Connor.

Ambulance calls aren't free

BY MAGGIE
PETRUSHEVSKY
The New Tanner

With all the hoo-haw about changes to Ontario's health care system I thought I had just discovered a new reason to crab about the latest cuts to OHIP. Seems what I've really discovered is how healthy my family is and how lucky I have been to have them that way all these years.

Dad had so much trouble with his breathing in the middle of the night a couple of weeks ago I wound up having to call 911 and get him to Georgetown hospital. The ambulance fellows arrived promptly and by administering oxygen even before they got him on a stretcher he actually didn't need to leave the house. That, of course, was another piece of hindsight, but the point is we can't fault the service we received.

They gave him another dose of the oxygen treatment in hospital and two hours later I got to bring him home. Which is what I mean about not needing to take him out of the house in the first place.

Then this week the bill arrived. Now \$45 is not a huge amount. When a life is - or at least appears to be - on the line, \$45 is insignificant and I freely admit it. What caught me off guard was the fact you receive a bill for using the ambulance. I mean, when you're facing an emergency what choice do you have? Through some misguided notion for which I can't recall the basis, I thought emergency ambulance service was free.

As a kid I remember a neighbour calling the ambulance and getting a bill but it was something for which he could have called a taxi to get the family member to hospital. It wasn't a genuine emergency and everyone agreed on that.

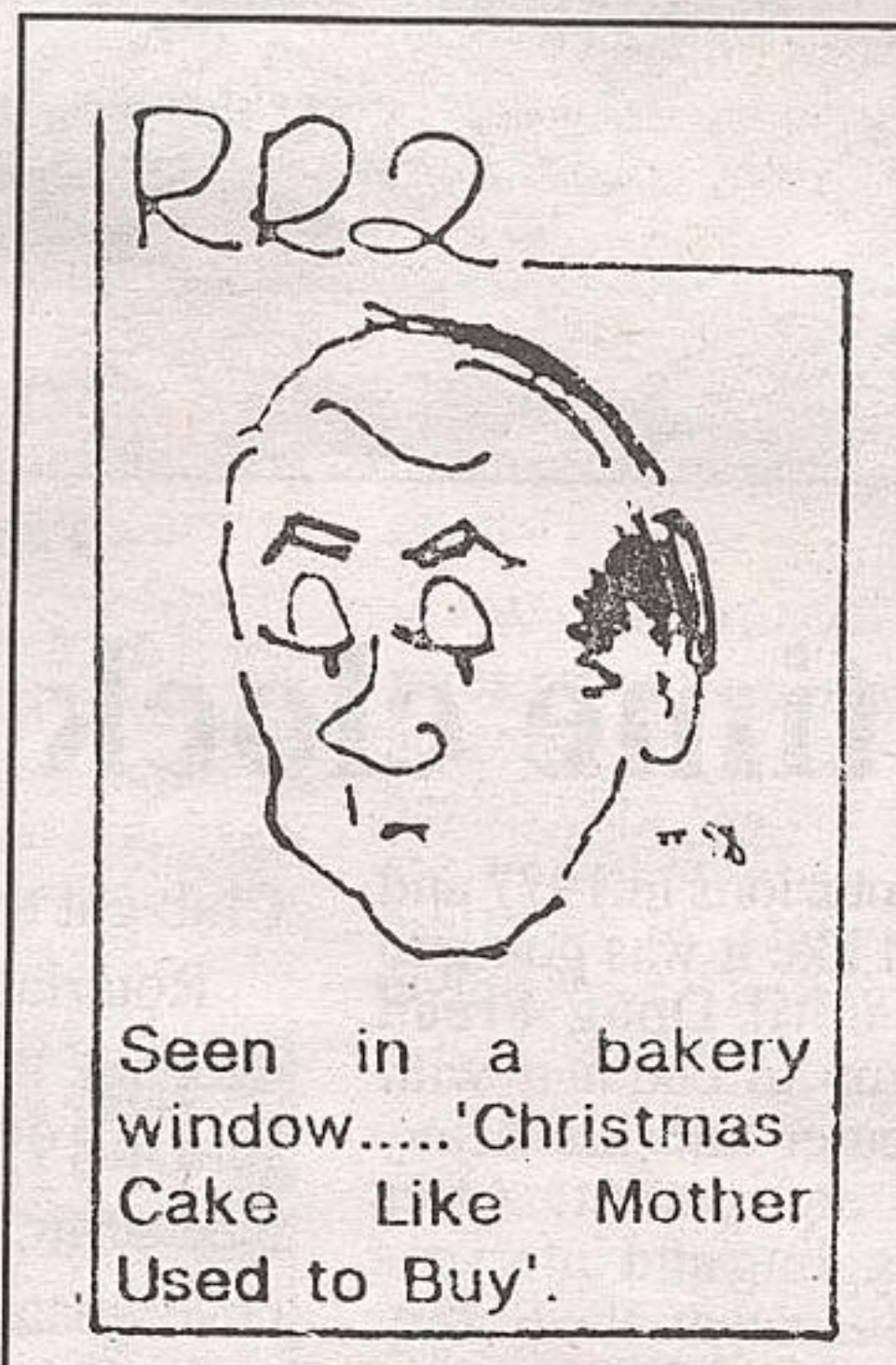
A couple of years ago our family doctor sent my husband from his office to hospital by ambulance. Vasyl's blood sugar was out of whack; he needed oxygen and he was on the verge of a heart attack. Lacking specific equipment the doctor could not treat him in his office so the hospital was the appropriate place for him. However, had he known the doctor's plan, Vasyl would have called me out of work to transfer him the few

blocks rather than using an ambulance. That, I suppose, is part of what misled me about the cost of ambulance service. Since he could have travelled by car, we always thought it was a non-emergency call and that's why we were billed.

Over the years I have taken Dad to hospital once and Vasyl twice during heart attacks. If that seems strange blame it on the peculiarities of living in Acton. Having local physicians with no privileges at Georgetown we automatically head for Guelph in any emergency. That's where all our records are. That's where our doctors attend us. That's where you find the specialists if you need them.

BUT - Georgetown is five miles closer according to the Ministry of Health and if you use an ambulance you must go to the closest hospital. That is another one of those debates with assorted answers depending on who you talk to. For most of us however, you don't look for conversation in an emergency. You go for results. For me that always meant get them to Guelph General - fast.

To get there by ambulance from our house so far as I could see was out of the question so I always did my own ambulance runs. I remember at one point on one run having to stop in Rockwood so my husband could take a breather. He was such a back seat driver I was apparently scaring him worse than the pain in his chest.



This time however, Dad needed oxygen. Any hospital would do for that and since it was one of those bitterly cold, windy nights I couldn't take him outside without getting him oxygen first. In other words, there was no choice. It had to be an ambulance.

In chewing and gnashing my teeth over this bill one staffer said she thought seniors were covered for free ambulance care as they are with free drug care.

Another staffer told me her daughter had been sent to hospital by ambulance after a car accident a few years ago and had received a bill.

That really surprised me since my mother was hospitalized for a couple of months after a car accident 20 years ago. Not only did she go to Georgetown hospital by road ambulance; she was taken from there to Sunnybrook in Toronto by air ambulance and we received no bills.

So far as I can see things have changed.

Talking to a staffer at the ambulance headquarters this week I was assured everyone gets billed. They always have.

"I've been here 13 years, lady, and they always send a bill. Nothing's changed."

I guess I've been told! Sally Beckett from the business office at Georgetown hospital agrees that everyone gets a bill "unless they're on social assistance or Home Care through Halton Region." Patients may also be transferred from one hospital to another by ambulance if there is a need to receive special treatment available only in a second location.

The \$45 charge has "been in effect for some time" but the actual bill is much higher - several hundred dollars per call, Beckett says. OHIP covers that main bill and the \$45 is a surcharge - like the \$6 fee on prescriptions for seniors.

"Some medical plans will also cover ambulance service, so check it out if you have one," Beckett advised.

So now I know. Ambulance rides cost - even in emergencies and even for seniors. Next question. How do we get the drivers to accept sending Acton residents to Guelph without a doctor's order to do so since you don't have time for that sort of red tape in an emergency?



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