

### ABOUT THE MEMOIR CLASS

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The Association of MIT Retirees memoir class has been going strong since 2011. This class of dedicated writers is led by **Nita Regnier**, Association advisory committee member and former instructor in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies in the Writing Center. New members are welcome to join the memoir class! Please contact the Association at 617-253-7910 or [retirees.assoc@mit.edu](mailto:retirees.assoc@mit.edu) for information.

The writers have produced fine work and we are pleased to share their stories with you. Our seventh featured work is by **Bill Snow**. After a decade in academia, Bill spent another fifteen years in the employ of the U.S. Government, both in uniform and as a civil servant. He then became a technical staff member in the Aerospace Division of MIT Lincoln Laboratory, retiring in 2009.

### WHY WRITE?

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Nita asked why, after four years, I continue to drive an hour each way to attend her memoir writing classes. "I can't just sit home and stare out the window," was my flippant answer. In fact, the camaraderie of an active and creative group in the Association of MIT Retirees is part of the reason. Part, too, is the feeling of accomplishment that writing memoir brings. All that said, the real reason: Writing about characters I knew in my youth has allowed me to get reacquainted with an impressionable happy boy who grew up in rural coastal Maine.

Peddlers were an integral part of life there. In the 1940s and well into the 1950s they brought food and services right to the door of the house where I grew up. Three memorable characters were the fish man, the egg man, and the bread man.



### DEAR DAVID

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Dear David was our fish man. "Dear, I saved this haddock just for you." All the housewives had heard the line. They called him "Dear David."

Thursday mornings, when he backed his 1947 Buick station wagon into our driveway, its wooden tailgate was always down. Dear David had removed the back of the car's rear seat and installed a deep metal tray the full width of the cargo bay. It extended from the rear bumper to the back of the front seat. The tray was filled with crushed ice and atop the ice was piled cod, haddock, mackerel, flounder, hake, and sometimes tuna. On the lowered tailgate he had mounted a thick wooden cutting block beside which was an array of butcher knives and a shallow tin for fish waste. Also affixed to the tailgate was a long roll of butcher paper mounted on a steel dispenser, with a heavy cast iron cutting-off blade resting against the roll. A grocer's scale hung from a hook screwed in the open lift-back panel of the station wagon's back end.

When Dear David knocked at the kitchen door he carried a pint-sized cardboard carton – the kind used for take-out Chinese food. "Dear, I knew



you'd want these," he told my mother, "I cut them out just for you this morning. Tongues and cheeks."

He knew my mother was French Canadian and that for Canucks the gelatinous tongues and cheeks extracted from large codfish heads were a delicacy. Boiled with onions and served in cream sauce over mashed potatoes, this valueless, gross-textured, and insipid fish product appealed to a narrow clientele.

"How much?" my mother asked.

"My dear, these are a gift for you." He handed the carton to her. "And on ice, out here, I have a beautiful haddock I saved just for you." He took one or two backward steps as he swept an arm out toward his station wagon.

Not only did my mother feel an obligation to Dear David for the tongues and cheeks; she needed fish for Friday. She followed him out to his traveling fish market. He reached into the back of the station wagon, shoved the fingers of his left hand into the gills of a whole haddock and wrenched it aloft.

"It's way too big for any of my oven dishes," my mother protested.

Straightaway he held aloft another haddock half the size.

"Yes, that one."

“Do you want fillets or would you prefer bone-in, dear?” The head, tail, and fins fell away from the cutting block into the waste tin. Our shy cat, Dora, appeared out of nowhere – as she always seemed to do on Thursday mornings. He tossed a small by-catch fish on the driveway; Dora loved Dear David.

“Oh yes, bone-in,” my mother said. “We’re having it baked.”

He held the dressed haddock in one hand and, with the other, ripped a generous piece of butcher paper from its roll. The paper and fish landed on the platform of the grocer’s scale.

“Four pounds – a few ounces over. Anything else, dear?”

“That’s it for today.”

“For you dear, that’ll be sixty-five cents.”

With that, he lifted down the grocer’s scale from its hook, stowed it beside the ice-filled tray, tossed Dora another morsel, and drove away.

The baked haddock was delicious. As for the tongues and cheeks, only two of our family savored the delicacy, my mother and me. She – and of course Dora – anticipated the fish monger’s return. As insincere as he was, Dear David had the freshest fish.

## EGG MAN

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Another peddler was the egg man, Mr. Verrell. He arrived near sunset on Fridays in his prewar Ford station wagon. He was old and smelled of chicken manure, and



he spat tobacco juice on our lawn. His teeth were long and yellow and the spaces between them were dark brown. To six-year-old me, Mr. Verrell looked scary.

He knocked at our door carrying papier-mâché cartons of eggs. My mother always bought two dozen: graded hen eggs were 24¢ a dozen and pullet eggs 18¢. I liked her to buy the pullet eggs because they were different sizes and some had two yolks.

Mr. Verrell also sold chickens – the whole chicken, plucked and dressed-out, wrapped in wax paper and slid inside a brown paper bag with its yellow shins and ankles sticking out. My mother bought one every other Friday.

By 1949 we no longer had to rely on Mr. Verrell. The house next to ours had been bought by Lawrence and his wife; they were old, in their sixties. Lawrence built a lean-to coop on the back of the small garage and began to raise Rhode Island Reds. He had a rooster who crowed every morning just before sunrise, waking my baby sister; my mother hated that rooster. Once the hens began to produce eggs, our neighbor became our egg man until 1953. One night the chicken coop and all its inhabitants were destroyed by a fire that consumed the garage and a corner of the house as well. By then, though, an Independent Grocers Association store had opened on the main highway at the head of shore road.

## BREAD MAN

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Every day but Sunday, Len Goody drove his tall delivery van from Portland, Maine to his rural routes. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday he brought bakery goods to the residences on shore road and its tributaries of short lanes. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, he canvassed the more populated area along the beach. On any day, if he spied the bold black S of the white Sterling’s Bakery sign displayed in the window of a house, he stopped.

He stopped too at the fish cannery situated on a marshy strip between his two routes. It was the only manufacturing establishment in the vicinity and operated six days per week. Management had underwritten a fifteen-minute coffee break for all employees at 9:30 each morning. Len Goody supplied the doughnuts. Between the private residences and the cannery, he had a good business going.

Len had begun working for Sterling’s Bakery as a high school student; the original bread man had needed an assistant during the summer. Tourists then occupied every claptrap lean-to and cabin anywhere near the beach. After his graduation in 1940, Len was employed full-time at the bakery’s Elm Street facility in Portland. There he loaded fresh bakery products into delivery vans that travelled to towns in southwestern Maine. There, too, later in the day, he off-loaded unsold baked goods from the returning vans. The Elm Street foreman saw to it that those goods went to Sterling’s Day-Old Store.

Len’s tenure at the bakery was interrupted by WW II; he was drafted and served as a field medic in Europe. When he returned to Sterling’s after his discharge he took over the shore road and beach routes. He had an ingratiating personality and housewives accepted him as part of their rural life. He brought bread, pies, and pastries right to their doors and they all bought from him – until he cheated the Brownie Scouts.

Door-to-door peddling of baked goods was not an easy employment. Len arrived at the Elm Street facility early to specify what he wanted to be loaded into his van. Then, by 7:30, no matter what the weather, he was knocking on the doors of his regular customers. He continued into the evening and, during the summer months, after 9 o’clock he was still vending to tourists in rental units around the beach area.

He carried a low-sided rectangular trencher fitted with a rigid metal bail, its 2½-foot by 1½-foot cargo space filled with baked goods. Half of the trencher held packaged bread loaves standing on end, hamburger buns, hot dog and dinner rolls, boxes of doughnuts and crullers. In the other half were boxed fruit pies and cakes and windowed cartons filled with fancier pastries like cupcakes and éclairs; he would adapt the trencher's contents to what each housewife might be tempted to buy.

A regular customer didn't have to pay for whatever she chose then and there. On the back of the big S window card were preprinted columns. Len would grasp the pen from over his ear and write in one of the columns the total amount of that day's purchase. On his third visit, his client was expected to pay for the week's purchases. He would then line-out that week's balance due and enter his initials. With bread at 18¢ a loaf, English muffins 22¢, and doughnuts 25¢ a half-dozen; even for our large family the weekly total was never more than \$2.

The current weather was Len's favorite topic of conversation, with maybe a word on the rising cost of living. He never mentioned local schools or youth organizations; he and his wife were childless. She was, in fact, a successful professional, the accountant for a textile manufacturer in a nearby mill city. My mother did discover that they slept in separate bedrooms. "During those thunderstorms last night," he let drop, "I had to go in and close the windows in my wife's room."

Len's earnings weren't lavish but they weren't trivial either. Sterling's Bakery charged its route delivery men 85% of the retail selling price of its products. So his weekly keep from the \$2 he collected at our house was 30¢. Granted our family purchased more than average; even so, from the two hundred and fifty households he canvassed, plus his daily sale of twelve dozen doughnuts to the



fish cannery, Len was netting close to \$100 each week.

The many hours he labored had their reward. With their combined incomes, he and his wife were comfortably well off. "Well off" wasn't good enough, though. He devised a scheme that, by the late 1940s, affected a substantial increase in his take-home pay.

With his discount as a route delivery man, Len could purchase day-old baked goods at 40-percent of their initial retail price. Although it was against the bakery's policy to allow day-old goods to be reloaded onto delivery vans, Len knew the Elm Street facility foreman well and paid for his cooperation in cash.

The summertime tourists at the beach were transients and strangers to one another. They were easy prey and Len peddled his day-old baked goods to them with abandon. Each transaction was cash – no S window card for these folks and no running balance. His beach route was lucrative.

Although the women in our country town were isolated, they met one evening each week in one living room or another to sew. The husbands referred to their weekly event as the "Hen Social."

One evening one of them griped, "I don't trust that Len Goody. He's peddling stale stuff; I know what fresh bread is and his ain't it. He thinks he can sell us any old thing! You need to keep an eye on him."

He wouldn't sell us stale bread!" another objected. "Lenny's been comin' to our house since he was a high school boy.

He'd never do that! He's such a sweet little man."

A third shook her head. "Pauline's onto somethin'. Yesterday, he brought in English muffins that were hard like they'd been around a week and I told him so! Don't be fooled by his smile. His skin is thick as leather; you can't insult Lenny. Anything I buy from him, I squeeze first." After that Hen Social meeting, my mother began to have her own suspicions.

Len's scheme was easier to perpetrate at the fish cannery. There the workers got their coffee and doughnuts free; they were not inclined to count a gift horse's teeth. Gradually, he included more and more boxes of stale doughnuts in the dozens he laid out on a counter in the cannery's kitchen. The coffee break was segregated by gender; the forty or so guys stood around or leaned against the walls in the cannery's kitchen while drinking coffee, devouring doughnuts, smoking cigarettes, and chatting. There too, Len Goody helped himself to the coffee on offer and consumed the doughnuts along with the men – the more he ate the more money he made. And, of course, he took only from the fresh boxes. On his way to the kitchen he would leave two dozen doughnuts for the ten or so women workers on a picnic-style table in their powder room's entryway. Only the small management staff in the office upstairs – where once a week Len received \$30, in cash – was exempt from stale doughnuts.

The women workers were the first to cause Len trouble. Both Bernice and her husband Freddy worked at the cannery. She told him that the women were sure Len was foisting off his stale day-old doughnuts on the factory workers. Freddy, a doughnut lover and man of few words, knew from his own coffee break experiences that his wife had a valid point. One morning it seemed that Len had laid out in the cannery's kitchen nothing but boxes of stale doughnuts. As Len was leaving, Freddy picked up an extra hard



doughnut and pitched it at him. It struck him on the head, thudded to the floor, rolled, and toppled over on its side. The men cheered; Len just kept walking out. Next day the doughnuts were fresh, but within a week the sinkers were back. He could not resist the substantial increase in his compensation. Some weeks he was realizing more than \$10 from the fish cannery even after he'd given the Elm Street foreman his cut.

But then the women workers boycotted him; they started bringing their own sweets from home and left Sterling's doughnuts in their boxes. Len had to accommodate them. The two dozen doughnuts he left on their picnic table were same-day fresh, but that reduced his windfall. He could only perpetrate his scheme on the cannery's men and even with them he had to be careful. Still he found he could get away with three or four stale dozens each day.

In the course of a decade, Lenny bankrolled a considerable amount of money but finally his greed backfired in a way he never expected.

A number of nine-year-old girls had become eligible for "fly-up" to Senior Brownie Scouts. Ann, the fourth oldest in our family was one of them; my mother was the Assistant Brownie Scout Leader. Parents and friends were invited to attend the "fly-up." It would be an outdoor picnic with a bonfire, roasted hot dogs and grilled hamburgers.

On Tuesday, my mother placed the Sterling's S card in the window and Len stopped on his way to his beach customers. She ordered three dozen

rolls and two dozen buns for delivery on Thursday at the local church where the Brownie Troop met. When he stopped at our house on Friday to receive payment for the week, my mother was lying in wait.

"Get this stuff out of here!" She shoved a cardboard box across the kitchen floor toward him with her foot. "Your card's in there; your money too. Now, get out and don't stop here again! It's one thing to sell us stale bread; it's quite another to cheat those innocent little Brownie Scouts!"

"What? . . . Ma'am . . . what do you mean?"

"I mean these stale buns and rolls you left at the church yesterday – they must have been a week old if they were a day; on some there was even blue mold! You're not fooling anyone, Len Goody. There they still are; nobody would eat that moldy stuff! Get out, and stay out!"

The following Monday the production manager of Sterling's Bakery knocked at the door. He wanted to talk to my mother. "There must have been some mix-up at our Elm Street plant; I can explain."

"You get out too! I want nothing more to do with that Len Goody or with Sterling's Bakery either. He's been cheating us for years. Keep your stale stuff; keep it all!"

"We'll do better, ma'am. Just give us a chance."

"No! Enough is enough!"

By the late 1950s large markets had begun to appear at shopping malls and Sterling's Bakery home-delivery business model became anachronistic. The volume of bakery goods sold by its rural route bread men fell sharply and the bakery faced a crisis: the cash-flow for day-to-day operations was often inadequate and local banks were reluctant to extend credit. Len, the bakery's top home-delivery man,

felt the declining sales in his pocket and recognized the possibility that the goose laying the golden eggs might succumb. He and the Elm Street foreman, along with two of the bakery's managers agreed to loan the bakery operating funds on a short-term, high-interest basis. By the time the bakery's home-delivery business went bankrupt in 1962, he'd lost most of his ill-gotten wealth.

Len and his wife did retain their home, thanks to her continued employment. He was seen, now and then, driving along shore road; a small man perched on the high driver's seat of the empty rusted-out van he'd gotten in the bankruptcy settlement. "Sterling's Bakery," lettered on the van's sides, had been whitewashed over.



The mission of the **Association of MIT Retirees** is to provide opportunities for members to engage with the Institute and to develop programs and events that are both of interest and fun. We strive to be an active component in the MIT family by keeping our members in touch with each other and the Institute.

**Nancy Alusow** and **Joe Collins** are chairs of the Association. **Anne Hartung Whealan** is the Association's treasurer. The organization is supported by Traci Swartz and Anthony Farrell of the Community Services Office.

Your suggestions for activities are welcome.

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