

THEIRS

Living in a land where freedom knocks

Sixty six years later, Jack van der Geest still hears the sound of Nazi fists pounding on the door. He still has the nightmares, too, during the hazy, surreal hours of slumber when a vulnerable mind drifts back to his family home in The Hague on the night the horrors began.



"I can remember it all, without notes," van der Geest said last week, sitting in a comfortable living room at the Sandstone Ridge apartments, far in miles and time from a death camp called Buchenwald.

Wednesday was a special day for van der Geest, certain to add more good memories to all the long-distant bad. He was celebrating his 85th birthday and had just received a copy of a statement in his honor read into the Congressional Record by Sen. John Thune.

Thune's West River director, Qusi Al-Haj, offered the document along with a personal note from the senator. It was more than official business for Al-Haj, a Palestinian who became a naturalized U.S. citizen 17 years ago. Van der Geest had told his personal story as part of the ceremonies on the day Al-Haj became a citizen. It's something he won't forget.

"I was so inspired by what he said, and what he had suffered when he lost his freedom and how he sacrificed to regain it," Al-Haj said. "He truly appreciates and understands what we have in this country."

Van der Geest was 18 on that August night in 1942 when he and his family were shoved into a German military truck and hauled off to prison. Like his father, van der Geest had been working against the Germans with the Dutch underground. They'd been turned in by a traitorous Dutch neighbor.

His father, Jacobus, would die at the hands of the Nazis the following year at Dachau. His mother, Anne, would eventually be released, through the kindness of a German soldier. Mother and son would be reunited after the war.

And in between, Jack van der Geest would barely survive Buchenwald, as his once-robust 6-foot-2-inch frame shriveled to less than 100 pounds during six months of abuse.

"I was there 183 days," van der Geest said. "I weighed 185 pounds to start. I was a well-fed Dutchman."

Van der Geest's eventual escape was a riveting, seemingly improbable tale told in his 1995 book, "Was God on Vacation?" He made it out by feigning death, being dragged from a barracks, scooped up by a front-end loader and dropped in a pile of bodies waiting to be cremated. Van der Geest said he lay there without water and barely moving for more than 12 hours before somehow surprising a German guard and making his escape.

That began a journey through Germany, where he was helped by a kind German farm family, and on to France and service with the French underground. After serving as an allied interpreter who also interrogated German prisoners of war, van der Geest finally made it to the United States in 1945.

He came to Rapid City with the U.S. Air Force in 1951 and made the Black Hills his home. He helped with citizenship ceremonies, a joyful chore that he considers his duty.

"It is a delight to help make citizens in a country I am so proud of myself," van der Geest said.

So far removed now from the source of his nightmares, van der Geest continues to celebrate life in a free land — where a knock on the door is something to be welcomed, not feared.

Contact Kevin Woster at 394-8413 or kevin.woster@rapidcityjournal.com

OURS

Rate increases need to be monitored

THE ISSUE: Rapid City water and sewer rates are expected to be increased to pay for water projects.

OUR VIEW: It's a necessary evil. However, when the projects are done, rates should decrease.

Local taxpayers already burdened by a litany of new expenses and now facing an uncertain economy, are getting another round of bad news: Rapid City water and sewer customers will almost surely see significant rate increases.

The Rapid City council is considering increasing water and sewer rates up to 10 percent with a built-in annual increase. Other funding is being explored but it's unlikely user fees won't be increased significantly.

It's anticipated the rates would increase for a minimum of five to seven years to pay for major water treatment plant upgrades and projects that would cost the city about \$135 million.

The rate increases are a necessary evil to fund projects to provide the quality and quantity of water this community needs now and well into the future.

The real issue now becomes what happens to the rates after the project

is fully funded. We notice, as most taxpayers do, governments tend to spend at the level at which they are funded. It's not often rates/taxes decrease when a government body curtails spending. Turns out, government often finds other uses for the funding and taxpayers often forget.

The council and utility board should commit to reducing the rates after the water projects have been completed. They should undergo an annual review of the revenue received from the increases, examine how that is being applied to the project debt, and offer the public a timeline for which they anticipate lowering rates.

We see the value of these water projects. We don't like the timing, however, considering the financial

crisis facing the country and an expected increase in winter energy bills. The unfortunate timing is out of the council's hands, but a reassurance to the public the rate increases are temporary and will be monitored closely isn't.

The city is growing and will need water for that future growth. The rate increase, at this time, is necessary. The best-case scenario is for the city to finish paying off the treatment plant project and lower rates shortly after.

To keep the rates elevated after the project's completion would be a disservice to the community. So, on behalf of the taxpayers, we'd ask that council address the post-project rates at this time as well.

ARTISTS'



YOURS

Rushmore exhibit recognizes an important part of U.S. history

We, the so-called first Americans, have every right to display any aspect of our cultural traditions of our society for the touring public. For Trontvet's information, he should visit the library and look up "Presidents of the United States in American Indian History." The millions of acres taken from the American Indians for \$.01 to \$.03 cents an acre under duress is shameful. The largest hanging in American history took place in Mankato, Minn. on Dec. 26, 1862, and President Lincoln gave the order to hang the 38 Dakota Sioux on one large scaffold. The great citizens of Mankato stage an annual program to commemorate the occasion. To impound the American Indian on reservations was a disgrace. But as great citizens of this country, so much so in World War I, that our young men who volunteered to fight for America were not considered citizens of said country. This history will not be seen on Mount Rushmore; it should give some authority for Mr. Baker to recognize the American Indian as part of U.S. History.

VERNON ASHLEY
Pierre

Despite comments to the contrary, Palin a good choice

After viewing the Republican Party's nomination of Gov. Sarah Palin to be Sen. John McCain's running mate for vice president, I have to disagree with Sen. Tim Johnson when he said she was weak.

Hearing Gov. Palin was a breath of fresh air. Her forceful dynamic speech didn't sound weak to me of what has to be done to change Washington, D.C., and the liberal philosophy by both Democrat and Republican 'elitist' who has controlled policies for the past 8 years.

Is my opinion, her antagonists are envious and hypocritical because she's not a liberal Democrat or Republican.

If she were liberal in her beliefs rather than being a conservative by defending the little unborn, taking on big-government spending-waste, defending the Second Amendment, national security, and less government intrusion, the liberal/left and bloggers wouldn't be trying to destroy her.

On national security, look what 'giant' bear is in Alaska's backyard. I wouldn't be surprised if Gov. Palin did get that 3 a.m. phone call!

MARILYN HAVENS
Rapid City

Visa story missed one element: Pay scales differ for workers

The Journal headline story about Visa changes missed the vital part of the story. You write about "area hotels and restaurants who need foreign workers to do the work they say American workers won't."

This is not only untrue but insulting to Americans. What is omitted is the part: "...at the low wages foreign workers will accept." Nowhere in the story is it explained what they actually pay those workers. It's probably true that most American workers won't do these jobs at \$5 per hour. Potential American workers face high food, fuel and tuition expenses. But, modernize equipment, improve working conditions and pay \$10 per hour and they'd get plenty of takers. Paying foreign workers lower wages depresses wages throughout the local economy.

It's the law of supply and demand. It works!

WILLIAM HEYING
Spearfish

Recycling program is alive and doing very well in Rapid City

Some people say the city no longer has a recycling program. Not true! The operation is doing well, over \$500,000 in resales annually. Good! Creates jobs and a cleaner world.

However, some (most) private trash collectors have not yet gotten involved, and their collection goes straight to the landfill. Not good! I have a feeling there is a reason.

Since private collectors collect the trash from some homes and most businesses, that is a lot of expensive landfill — to say nothing of the mess and waste. Let's insist that our collectors for home, fast food and other businesses, cooperate with recycling.

Meanwhile, we should just sort and carry our own. Those bins at Fitzgerald Stadium, Fairmont and West Boulevard aren't all that far away.

Call 355-3496 for more information.

AUDREY SINGER
Rapid City

Vote however you want, but get free of government handouts

A reader made a statement in the paper the other day that they couldn't understand how anyone on welfare or making minimum wage could possibly vote Republican. I'm sorry, but politics aside, this is one of the most asinine

comments I have ever read.

Unfortunately this seems to be the prevailing attitude in America today. People such as this reader expect our government to provide them with homes, food, money and jobs. The government should not be responsible for raising families. Minimum wage will not support a family and it is not intended to do so. There are some who are legitimately on government aid; however, this should be temporary. There are third, fourth, and fifth-generation families who subsist on welfare. That is absurd! I have worked my entire life. I grew up in poverty in the deep south — I know what being poor is all about. I sincerely believe that anyone can pull themselves up by the bootstraps, as the old saying goes, and provide a decent life for themselves and their families. Vote however you want, but get off of your lazy, whining backsides and quit relying on us working taxpayers to support you.

RICK JOHNSON
Rapid City

Palin/Biden debate shouldn't be a topic Johnson brings up

In the 8/30/08, Rapid City Journal, Sen. Tim Johnson is quoted saying Gov. Sarah Palin was a "weak choice" as Sen. John McCain's running mate and "that she will do very poorly" debating Joe Biden. Debates by others shouldn't be a topic of discussion from Johnson or his staff.

Sen. Johnson and his staff keep saying and South Dakota papers "reporting" that Johnson's mind is 100 percent; he just can't yet talk, enunciate or walk well. What does his "mind is 100 percent" mean, 100 percent of what? Have comprehensive tests been done to compare his current mind to his prior baseline? Of course not, because people don't establish quantitative/qualitative baselines prior to an injury; this 100 percent statement is, then, simply political propaganda. One can only speculate about the outside Democrat pressures on him to run for re-election. Any effective senator must do more than simply vote (about 90 percent party line for Tim) and gather pork; he/she must be able to convincingly present and debate issues! In the unfortunately cynical world of politics, the Democrat leadership clearly won't have Sen. Johnson, if re-elected, continue chairing any committees. What befell Tim Johnson was a tragedy. He needs to retire and devote full time to his recovery. My heart goes out to him and his family.

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