

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Wally Trabling has been writing about his experiences and insights on life since March 29, 1962.

Life's gourmand

For 30 years, Sentinel columnist Wally Trabling has shared his love of life with his readers

By PEGGY R. TOWNSEND
Sentinel staff writer

WALLY TRABING remembers jumping off a 153-foot bridge, attached to life only by a thick rubber cord. He remembers climbing Mount Fuji, struggling as he hit 11,000 feet and feeling the energy drain from his legs because of altitude sickness.

He knows how it feels to lie in an iron lung, to walk on the supports of the Golden Gate Bridge and see the sun rise in Budapest.

For him, life has been a series of experiences to be captured in words and shared with the thousands of people who read his column every day.

Today marks the 30th year of Trabling's column in the Sentinel. Five days a week, 52 weeks a year, Trabling has settled behind his desk in the newsroom and turned out columns on life, death, adventure and just plain people.

A pair of glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose and often plugged into Dixieland music on his Walkman, Trabling has writ-

ten about dogs and cats, and wily gophers who turn his garden into Swiss cheese. He has touted the joys of liver and onions, and described the loneliness of dying.

He's turned out roughly 7,500 columns — 7,500 chances to fascinate, to hit a nerve, and to touch someone's heart.

Over the years, readers would say, he has done all those things.

TRABING IS a tall, gangly man with unruly gray hair and a beard that comes and goes with the times.

For him, work is a blessing — a never-ending chance to try something different, meet someone new and to make a difference.

"The thing is, it's so much fun," said Trabling, who turns 71 in June.

"It's the *joie de vivre*. I just get so much joy in going to work every day, and doing something totally different. It's a total turnaround of ideas and investigations. You are dealing with people you admire, lots of times."

For him, the column has meant

learning to ski in his 60s, dressing up like a clown for Barnum and Bailey circus and seeing famed heart surgeon Norman Shumway at work.

It has also meant watching a murderer die in the gas chamber, having a brush with death in a boating accident and fighting fear as he rafted down a treacherous rapid in New Zealand.

"If life was food, he'd be the fattest man on earth, because he samples it all," said his son, Mark Trabling, now 40 and a housing development manager for the city of Upland.

"He's so endlessly curious," said his wife, Lois, a retired librarian. "He'll try anything — spin yarn, eat fish eyes. Wally's uniqueness is his total fascination with life."

Ask just about anybody in the newsroom and they'll come up with a story about him.

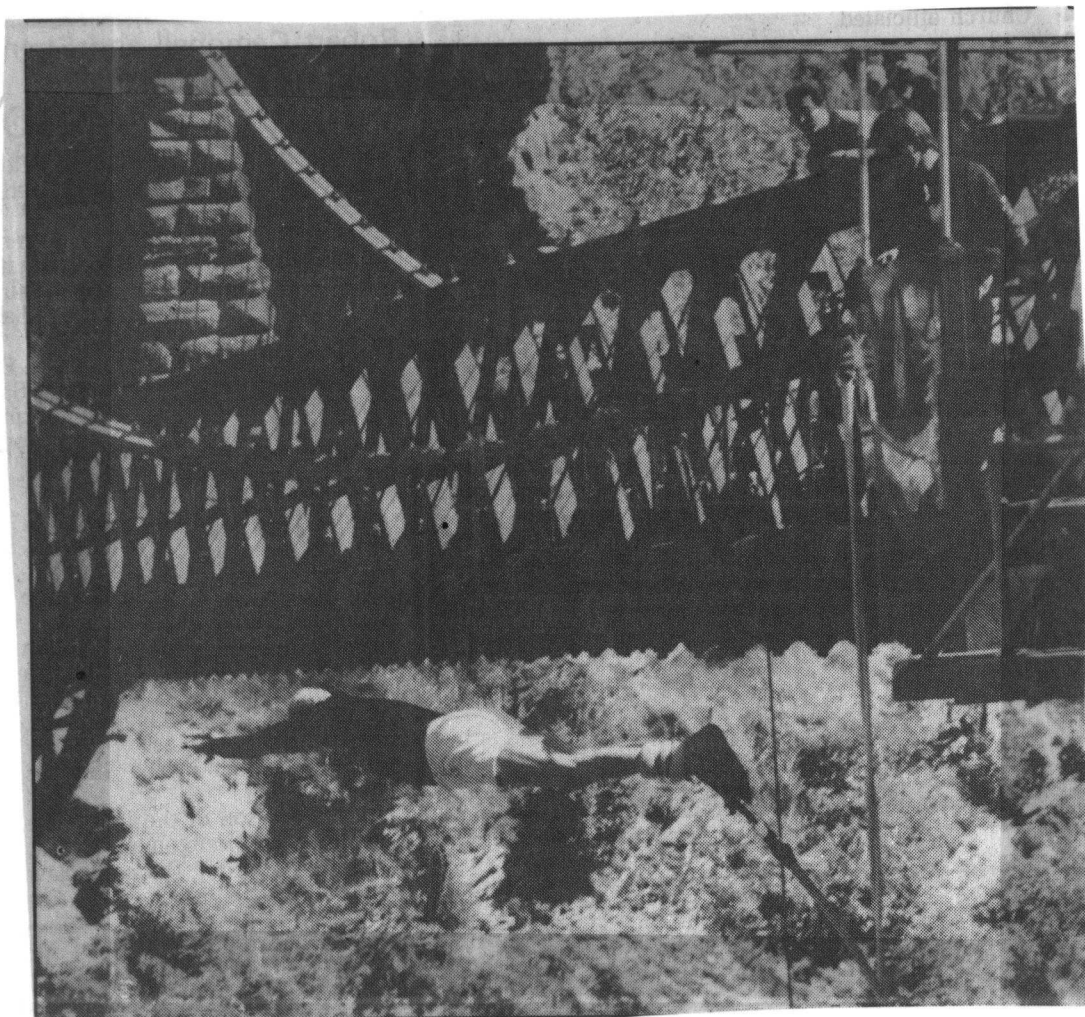
Like the time another reporter leaned over and lit Trabling's copy paper on fire as he typed the list of calls made by local fire departments for the day's newspaper.

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'If life was food, he'd be the fattest man on earth, because he samples it all.'

— Mark Trabling,
Wally's son

REFERENCE



Trabing through the years... In a 1963 photo, Sentinel columnist, Wally Trabing slides down a pole at the firehouse. The shot was taken to promote his column. Among his many adventures, Trabing has tried his hand at being a clown, and left, he tried bungee jumping at age 70.

Trabing

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Trabing didn't even pause as the paper burned in his typewriter.

"11:37 a.m." he typed. "I'm on fire."

Or the time he reported this fire call from Live Oak Fire Department.

"10:07 a.m. — Cat in attic.

"Un-atticed it."

Or the column he wrote about a man who claimed to have not eaten for 18 years.

For 14 inches of type, Trabing described how the amazing man lived on air and swore that people could gain weight by working in a restaurant kitchen.

The next day, the "breatharian" was spotted eating a hamburger at 7-Eleven.

"Living with him is never boring," said his wife. "It's never, ever boring."

TRABING GREW up in Kingsburg, a small town in the San Joaquin Valley. His mother was a housewife and his father was the town judge — a pair of upright people who served as fodder for many of his columns.

But some of his most memorable work are the columns about his grandmother — a bony, Bible-thumping woman who used to invite her young grandson to the hills near Watsonville for summer visits.

In those columns, he described the mountains, his grandma and the world through the eyes of a young boy.

"She had the makings of a cheerful woman, but her religion seemed to keep this in check," he wrote of her.

For the young Trabing, the pioneer woman who came out from Wyoming was fascinating.

"We hit it off. She was always making things — going into the woods to help me make a treehouse and making soap," said Trabing.

"She used to leave a lamp on at night and put her false teeth under it and the glow of the lamp was always shining on these teeth.

"It was pretty ominous, really," he said with laugh.

His father died of diabetes when he was a youngster.

"He really has an incredible drive to perform," said his son Mark.

"I sometimes wonder if his drive to perform had to do with him caring for his dying father when he was 12 or 13."

Trabing left Kingsburg and went to San Jose State, where he met his wife Lois.

Soon, he had a job as a copy editor at the San Jose Mercury — a job that provided him with his most memorable blunder.

One day, the young editor got a story about San Francisco's famous madame, Sally Stanford.

The story read, "San Francisco night-life figure Sally Stanford was robbed of all her furs and jewelry yesterday" and not knowing any better, the naive young editor from Kingsburg wrote:

"SF socialite robbed."

The headline set off a furor that landed him a spot in Herb Caen's column and brought a rebuttal editorial from the Mercury that said "in San Francisco there isn't much difference between a madame and a socialite."

Once he spent a week on an aircraft carrier and became intrigued by the cook's excellent carrot cake.

He asked the ship's cook for the recipe and received it in the mail about a week later.

"Twelve 100-pound sacks of flour," the recipe read. "78 dozen carrots; 10 pounds of baking soda...

"We finally got it straightened out," said Trabing.

He went into an iron lung one time to experience the feeling of being the prisoner of his own breath.

"It scared the hell out of me because I tried to fight it," he said.

Another time, a boat capsized in the ocean near New Year's Island, tossing Trabing and a park ranger into the churning sea.

"I was wearing one of those long-shoremen's stocking caps and as I dove down, this thing unraveled over my eyes," said Trabing.

"When I opened them up I thought I was 100 feet down. It was pitch black," he said.

Eventually, he and the park ranger made it back to shore.

One of his most powerful columns described the 1967 death in the gas chamber of murderer Aaron Mitchell.

Trabing wrote of the death and his own feelings as he and 57 others watched Mitchell die.

"We shuffled for position. My heart was pounding against my chest," he wrote.

He told of how the condemned man's eyes searched the crowd for a familiar face and how he looked as the gas reached his lungs.

"His head slowly nodded again to his chest, his eyes closed and he lost consciousness, and he appeared to be a man asleep in his armchair.

"Now it was a matter of waiting until his heart stopped.

"It took 12 minutes."

ONE OF Trabing's favorite column subjects was his family — his fat dog, Goldie; Streaker the cat, and three his children, Mily, Mark and Kent.

"I had a normal childhood," said son Mark, "except everyone happened to know when I had my first date."

"Maybe as a consequence all us kids struck out on our own — to retain our own identity. But we come back as often as we can."

Living in a fishbowl may have had its difficult moments, but it also meant a childhood of watching surgeries, hiking to remote ranger stations and having fascinating dinner conversations each night.

"He used to bring us autographs and things. Once he had all the Miss Santa Cruz contestants sign my bongo drums," said Mark.

But it was a close family and Trabing was always there when the family needed him.

"He was this crazy mix of vulnerability and strength," said Mark. "It was really interesting to be around him all the time because he was interested in so many things."

"I have a strong memory of always going to sleep with the sound of typing," said Mark.

Trabing didn't just write columns. He also played in the symphony, in a Dixieland band and dabbled in various artforms.

Eventually, he left the editor's job to go to Paris where he wrote short stories and later moved to London where he edited an American newspaper.

But in 1953, he came back to Santa Cruz and got a job at the Sentinel as a reporter.

During his first years, he covered everything from government to murders to the flood of 1955, "But I always had this opinion-oriented thing in my brain," said Trabing. "I tended to write more opinion than the factual story and (Arnold) Wechter (his editor) threw up his hands and said 'get him to write a column.'"

Trabing's career was born.

HIS FIRST column, called "Mostly About People," was sandwiched between an auto ad and a picture of a lumber yard being razed and was about an oldtimer's memories of Santa Cruz.

It ran on March 29, 1962.

Over the years, Trabing's columns have read like a litany of life: traveling, sickness, history, heroics, raising a family and cooking.

He loves to cook, collect humor books, and he took up downhill skiing in his late 50s.

For him, life presented itself as it would to a young child — always new, always fascinating.

Like the time he decided to fling himself from a 153-foot bridge, saved from death only by a thick bungee cord.

His wife asked him not to do it, trying to reason with him that a more interesting column would be if he decided NOT to jump.

"But he came back and said he had to do it, it was a celebration of life," said his wife.

"Wally always looks on the good side," said Mark Bergstrom, a former Sentinel reporter who sat near Wally for years in the newsroom. "Everyone else wanted to do investigative journalism, but he just wanted to write about good things.

"Maybe that's why he has lasted 30 years."

In honor of his 30th anniversary, Trabing has the day off today. His column will resume in Monday's Sentinel.