

Fact-finding on paper trails

by BROCK WEIR

Over the weekend, I went on a rather unusual fact-finding mission.

As a long-time admirer of comedic character actor Gale Gordon, I've collected a not insubstantial archive of his work, from television appearances lovingly restored and committed to DVD to more ephemeral objects like theatre programs, letters back to fans, and even drinking glasses sold by the homegrown Stage West dinner theatres in Calgary and Mississauga, where he often appeared.

As a prolific actor, however, there are many blanks of ?career? I still need to fill ? one of which was a mysterious one-season wonder sitcom in which he starred from 1956-57. Beyond photographs and just a couple of very brief clips posted online, CBS' ?The Brothers?, an unlikely show involving a sibling duo running a San Francisco photography studio, has alluded me and many other fans.

But recently I logged onto eBay and, to my astonishment, found a complete bound set of scripts up for bids. I couldn't let this golden opportunity to solve a mystery pass, so I watched the auction unfold for several days before jumping into the race. After ultimately placing the winning bid ? again, to my astonishment ? a series of circumstances led to a family road trip to upstate New York on Saturday morning to pick them up.

Although it's unlikely I'll SEE the episodes in question any time soon, I can now at least read along and get a feel for the show, including why it didn't go the distance, using my mind's eye to fill in the blanks.

As a fan, I was so happy that this paper trail existed to help shine a light on an admittedly niche piece of entertainment history, but, at the same time, it made me a bit wistful for the lack of paper trail we're collectively leaving today. I don't say this simply as the editor of a newspaper that exists both in the physical and online realms, but as someone who has learned and understands the importance of learning from those who have come before us.

As we have reported in previous editions, one Aurora couple is underscoring the impact of simple letter writing, an exercise which has become something of a lost art in recent years. Their mission has been to encourage communities across the GTHA to pick up a greeting card, or just a plain piece of paper, and jotting down simple but poignant thoughts and messages of support to our serving Canadian soldiers during the holiday season.

Simple, effective, time-tested ? and, if the words particularly touch the heart of a man or woman serving overseas, likely to be saved by the recipient not only for themselves, but a treasured memento that might be one piece of a much broader story of service ready to be discovered by their descendants or people of tomorrow.

It's not an onerous task to write the letter, but one that doesn't provide the instant gratification we're so accustomed to these days that perhaps it seems like an intimidating process, but it doesn't need to be.

One regret I live with is not following my grandmother's advice when I embarked on an internship in East Africa not long after graduating from university. As a woman who travelled extensively in her retirement, she bought me a travel diary to record all the interesting and mundane along the way. I knew the value of this, as I had read some of the diaries she completed in Europe and North Africa, and was determined to follow her example.

When I arrived in Rwanda in August of 2007, I was a diligent diary keeper ? at least for the first week, writing down just about every observation I had. But, somewhere along the line, my diligence dropped off as I got into the rhythm of life there and set out to make the most of it, leaving precious little time for the pen. While photos and videos are wonderful reminders of this interlude in my

life, a more comprehensive record would be so helpful in rekindling some of the day-to-day stuff that may have seemed boring at the time, but would only serve to enrich the tapestry of my memory.

In my case, this one example of a paper trail would have recorded many happy memories, but oftentimes can serve as poignant reminders of the past ? good and bad.

Samuel Pepys diary, a remarkable survivor from the 17th century, gives us an unparalleled view into life ? glorious and mediocre ? at the time of the Restoration, a volume that historians have drawn upon for centuries in painting a vivid picture of where we've collectively been.

The journal left behind by Anne Frank, only discovered after her horrific death in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and posthumously published by her father as *The Diary of a Young Girl*, remains a benchmark of diary-keeping and has served to inspire and warn generations since. Frank wasn't alone, of course, in keeping a diary during this very dark period in history and I count myself lucky to have had the opportunity to meet Holocaust survivors who kept diaries of their own and grateful they had the wherewithal not only to write their thoughts in the first place but share it with the world.

Could these types of writings be due for an unwelcome comeback?

I was struck by these thoughts on Monday morning when an American friend who is quite concerned about the results of the recent U.S. election threw a suggestion out to the world via social media. The suggestion was simple in and of itself, but the context, however, made me feel rather uneasy.

?I am going to make a suggestion,? wrote B.G. ?We're about to go through an extraordinarily significant time in the history of the world. If you've ever thought about journaling, this may be the time to start. You see, your journal, your thoughts, your record of the events that are about to unfold may be an important historical record someday. It may also help you keep some perspective as darkness unfolds us. I've found, myself, I was able to stick to a rule of writing something each day. I started every morning by putting the date at the top of the page, and then, during the day, I found time to put something, some thought, some perspective, some experience [on] paper.

?Perhaps you prefer to write only once a week or a couple of times a month. Whatever works for you. On the other hand, if you find yourself unable to put your thoughts down, that's quite understandable, too. But I ask you to consider it. As I said, experience could end up being very important to history.?

Indeed, there's a significant chance it could be and if some of the more dire predictions come to pass, could serve as testaments for what needs to be done to prevent it from ever happening again.

On this side of the border, we can only hope for the best ? and maybe record our own observations from afar.