

SHUTTLED ONTO A SIDETRACK

On Monday mornings I endeavor to inflate a small idea in a full-blown column. But today, as I riffled an old book seeking a pithy quotation, four scraps of paper tucked within the pages interrupted my pursuit and shuttled me onto an unexpected sidetrack.

My routine seldom varies: gather notebook, pen and reference materials; sit in recliner and wait for cat to jump into lap; pet cat, ponder and scribble notes; arise and type at computer; repeat until finished. Since the papers materialized somewhere between the petting and the pondering, could there be some common thread among them? Indeed.

The first, a postcard dated July 1966, conveys a strong admonition to my wife Mary from her college friend Linda Harden. "I'm sure you are going to Glorieta, aren't you? We are counting on you! Don't forget to send in your \$3 registration--now!" Though Mary had eagerly anticipated this summer missionary opportunity, our engagement permanently sidetracked her missionary aspirations.

Next is a business card for McAlister's Lawn Care Service, the once-thriving entrepreneurial enterprise our son launched as a teenager. In time, however, this singular focus was decisively sidetracked in favor of college.

A gracious note from a 13-year-old friend in 1998 begins with thanks to Mary for a birthday present. But her note takes an instant sidetrack to the deeper question on her mind: "Do cats bring gifts such as mice and rats to their owners? Mine brought a small mouse up to the garage and laid it on a rug, and I'm pretty sure it was a gift for her mommy!"

Memories of countless, fruitless medical sidetracks emanate from the final paper, a prescription from half a dozen years ago for medication that actually worked.

Sidetracks are a part of every life, sometimes even diverting the famous from their intentions.

For A. A. Milne, the success of his children's books, particularly his character Winnie the Pooh, sidetracked his desire to be a "serious" writer. "There was an intermediate period when any reference to Pooh was infuriating; but now such a 'nice comfortable feeling' envelops him that I can almost regard him impersonally as the creation of one of my favourite authors."

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle harbored similar feelings about his spectacular Sherlock Holmes. As early as 1891 Doyle shared his concerns about Holmes with his mother. "He takes my mind from better things." In time, Doyle found himself even more closely identified with Sherlock Holmes to the exclusion of his other works. "I weary of his name," he again told his mother.

Upon retirement from full-time employment 20 months ago, I expected to vigorously pursue several book proposals... locate other newspapers willing to publish this column... learn Spanish.... Contrary circumstances have sidetracked those visions and others.

And despite my efforts to change the outcome, I'm truly grateful that one manuscript never saw print. I'm confident that my own sidetracks have a purpose--even if only to park me in front of unseen opportunities vying for attention.