

ATTRIBUTE TO CHETLEY A. RITTALL

September 2, 2005

By Chip Griffin

“There is a strange holiness around our common days on common ground.” These are the words of Robert P. Tristram Coffin, just over a half-century ago here in Maine. I always sensed a “strange holiness” whenever I was in Chetley’s presence. True, many times, I also sensed an ambiguity in his inscrutable character and sometimes downright B.S. when his salesmanship was in full gear. Chetley was a colorful character and truly something else.

One of my favorite poems, “*Manifesto: The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front,*” by my favorite author, Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer and renowned writer, best portrays Chet Rittall for me:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion - put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Chet was fortunate to have been born in Dresden in 1933, but tragedy followed, as he spent too many years growing up in Massachusetts, a fact he never brought up. As soon as he could after high school he moved, for good, back to Maine. But some would never let him forget where he grew up.

I first knew Mr. Rittall, a nearby neighbor, in 1961, just three years after he and Joan had settled in their home and boatyard at the head of the harbor on Union Street, just in our backyard, when we lived on The Avenue. I used to cut through the Methodist Church parking lot, where I first rode my bike without training wheels at the age of 5 or 6, and where I took shortcuts back of the houses to visit with the Rittalls and find my sisters playing with Susan. Scott was just a baby, and so I would spend some time amidst the wood shavings, listening to Chetley's yarns, probably some of the tall tales later used in his dream-child, The Fishermen's Festival (originally his Lincoln County Shrimp Festival).

Later on, in the 1970s, Chet would become selectman in Boothbay Harbor and take pot shots that he formerly fired at my dad and the other selectmen. It was a post he held with honor, but not with the same joy; he was a natural rebel and rabble-rouser – a man of ideas and builder of things, not a man of convention and builder of organizations. Perhaps too many of us jumped with glee when, in the 1980s, we exported Chet from Boothbay Harbor to here in Boothbay, where Chet would taunt and tire out the Boothbay town officials and then become one himself again, transforming Boothbay (as he had in the Harbor) for the better.

Chetley generally attracted at least as many detractors as admirers. For a visionary that goes with the territory. Chet would dream the visions, launch his grenades, and move on to another idea and project. His greatest successes, such as the Fishermen's Festival, Boothbay Civic Association, and Reunification, were when he dreamed up the concepts and quickly stepped out of the way to let others construct the committees and get the glory. Why was reunification a success, when he led the effort twice and it failed three times? Just look at our present Boothbay Region Refuse Disposal District, the Boothbay Region Water District, the Boothbay Harbor Sewer District in Boothbay, mutual-aid fire

departments, and collaboration between code enforcement officers and other boards and municipal officers.

Chet was tighter than a tick. He called himself “cheap,” and sometimes tempered it to “frugal.” He would always try to barter his hand-made products for services. He would gripe about the budget, any budget – school, town, or his own. Chetley was tighter than bark on a tree and proud of it.

Chet could be a “wheeler-dealer” and make even his supporters and advisors very frustrated. Without divulging any confidences, let me disclose a sliver of light on one closing which had to close in 1986 for high-stake tax reasons. Chetley’s intransigence led to hair-pulling, name-calling, and eventually camaraderie (and he was my client on this deal; true to form, he was an adverse party about as many times as he was my client over the past 25 years).

Although Chet was neither the seller nor the buyer, nor an abutter, he helped prolong the closing, finally closing on the last day of the year in 1986 at the newly formed Tindal & Callahan Real Estate, and the closing started in the afternoon, continued with Judy Callahan and me typing some documents that night, and finally ended at 11:25 PM. During the evening, one of the participants had gone home and then returned a bit tipsy, and all of us were giddy with fatigue. But we successfully achieved all of what Chet wanted. I arrived home, with my pregnant wife and daughter already in bed, just after the ball had dropped at Times Square.

This past April, the Boothbay Harbor Rotary club honored Chet in front of many area residents, friends, and family, with the club’s Lifetime Service Award and the Rotary District 7780’s Centennial Service Award for Professional Excellence. I had the honor of speaking, within arm’s length of Chet. I almost quipped to him that this event was just like his memorial service, just a little early. But something stopped me; I had a premonition and recognition

that this thought was true, that Chetley knew it, and that he gloried in it.

The week before Chet's death, we had a terrific phone conversation, covering a wide range of topics: (1) an upcoming trip to Damariscove by some descendents of the Plymouth Colony (remember that Chet dreamed up the idea of putting Latin on the Welcome To Boothbay sign, "*Pelegrinis Cibum Dedimus, We Fed the Pilgrims*"); (2) our disagreements about a community college in the Boothbay Region; (3) reunification efforts, both past failures, recent successes, and future combining of Lincoln County high schools; (4) the gazebo at Barrett's Park and how it became a park; and (5) his idea from the 1960s of a footpath along the edge of the waterfront properties all around the inner harbor and my slight revision in 2005 of a suggested footbridge beyond low water mark around the inner harbor to avoid the need for easements from recalcitrant landowners. Chet, right to the end, was insatiably curious, always probing, and constantly dreaming and scheming.

Chet was a visionary, yet he reveled in history. His zest for history was not a quest just for items of antiquarian interest, but he realized that history contained a potent power to transform the community (as exemplified by his long association with the Boothbay Railway Village). Like the good rower, as Sandy Ives once observed, we cannot boldly face the future; rather, we can only glimpse the future by facing the past and pulling toward the future.

Chet Rittall revered the strange holiness all around our common lives on common ground. He knew that he could truly make a difference in this amazing community. Chet, with that twinkle in his blue eyes, got a charge out of life; Chet, with a whimsical smile, led the charge in many community causes; and Chet, with grit, persistence, and passion, charged us to change. Chet still challenges us to change, to dream new visions, and to build better

communities. Chet did do something every day that wouldn't compute. He was like the fox that makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. And Chet practiced resurrection.