

The world according to Jim Heffernan

Janna Goerdit | Duluth News Tribune | Published Thursday, November 6, 2008

Oddly enough, it was when Jim Heffernan stopped writing columns for the Duluth News Tribune — something he had done up to three times a week for 34 years — that he could release a collection of those columns.

“Cooler Near the Lake” is a selection of a year’s worth of Heffernan’s columns, from the well-known June 1979 ditty “Cooler Near the Lake” to lesser-known columns that Heffernan and his wife, Voula, dragged out of retirement.

The result is 52 favorites, some referring to his fictional wife, Blanche; others postulating on issues of the day or quirks of Duluth. And Heffernan, who always tried to inject humor into his writing, said he hopes there were a few base hits among the foul balls.

“No one bats 1.000 at anything,” Heffernan said. As he looked back on his years of work, “I said: ‘If I can bat .500, that’s wonderful. I hope I hit .300.’ But it’s not for me to judge.”

Duluth author and publisher Tony Dierckins said Heffernan picked “a great microcosm” of columns for the book. Dierckins had approached Heffernan about a compilation book several years ago.

“A lot of people have his clippings, have his columns taped to their refrigerators,” Dierckins said. “But newspaper isn’t meant to be durable; this is a way to get those columns out there.”

In June, Heffernan wrote his last column for the News Tribune after editors decided they wanted a series of different local columnists featured in the Sunday edition. Heffernan had worked for the paper for 42 years as a reporter, columnist and editorial page editor.

Severing that relationship hurt, Heffernan said. But it also opened the door to other projects.

Heffernan now writes a monthly column for Duluth~Superior Magazine. And when his fingers start getting itchy, Heffernan, who began his journalism career using a typewriter and carbon paper, sits down at his home computer and adds to his blog.

And after Dierckins asked again this summer about publishing a collection, Heffernan agreed.

He waded through columns he had forgotten entirely, columns he was proud of and some he would like to forget. Heffernan said he always “tried for a laugh,” whether he was writing about plagiarism or a lounge singer stage-named Rio Pardo.

That was the first column Heffernan wrote for the News Tribune. And decades and about 1,500 columns later, Heffernan still has the urge to explore life in Duluth through his writing.

“I’ve found out that I’m a person who’s got to write,” Heffernan said. “It’s good to have a career that interests you; I knew I couldn’t be a railroad clerk.”

— end —