

# commentary

from other pens...

## Riling people is job says rights watchdog

By Will Lester

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Some say Mary Frances Berry is a hero of the civil rights movement, others that she's too opinionated and divisive. Even one of her close friends says he "wouldn't call her a diplomat."

The chairwoman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission doesn't have many allies in power these days, and her commission doesn't have a great deal of clout as it investigates shortcomings of last year's election.

The 63-year-old professor at Pennsylvania University and civil rights veteran does have a bully pulpit, and she's not shy about using it.

"If we don't have people irritated, we're not doing our job," Berry said in a recent interview. "We're the gadfly. We're the watchdog that bites you on the leg, keeps tugging at you and says, 'How about this?'"

By Berry's definition, she must be doing her job.

She has irritated plenty of Republicans and conservatives nationally and in Florida in her handling of the commission's investigation of last year's elections in that state. Plenty of people cheer her efforts as well.

George W. Bush, who lost the popular vote to Democrat Al Gore, won Florida's 25 electoral votes on the basis of a statewide ballot count that gave him 537 more votes. That swung the election to Bush in the Electoral College. Voters in several counties said misleading voting equipment led them to cast their votes for the wrong candidate.

The commission held two hearings in Florida during the winter and recently issued a preliminary report on the election highly critical of the state's leaders, including Gov. Jeb Bush, younger brother of the president, and Secretary of State Katherine Harris.

"It seems to be quite clear some discrimination occurred, whether it was intentional or unintentional," Berry said at a recent commission meeting. She told Bush the commission would monitor the Legislature's spring meeting to see what corrective steps it will take.

After the report, the governor said the commission "has yet to be presented with any evidence of intentional discrimination," and the state is dealing with problems identified after the election. Her rejoinder: The voting rights law doesn't require proof of intent to show a violation.

The commission's preliminary report, compiled by Berry and approved by the full panel, failed to give Florida officials a chance to respond, Bush complained. "Hopefully, the commission will bring greater fairness and objectivity to the preparation of its final report," Bush said.

Berry says she's used to angry responses. She has had "some in the left press saying I'm a fascist pig" and "people on the right saying I'm a commie pinko lefty. I say a pox on both their houses," she said.

She has criticized every president since President Carter, who appointed her and later got pressure over the levels of financial aid for the poor. She was fired by President Reagan but regained her job after a lawsuit. She said President Clinton complained that Berry "would only give a C-minus" to civil rights accomplishments he was proud of.

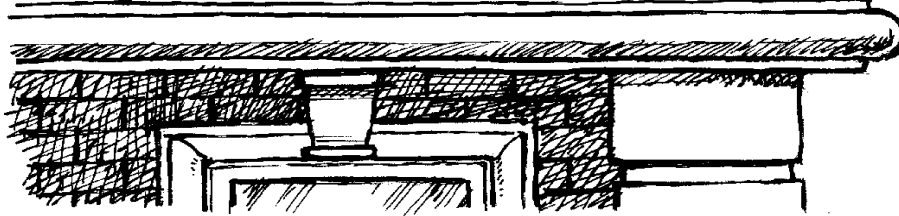
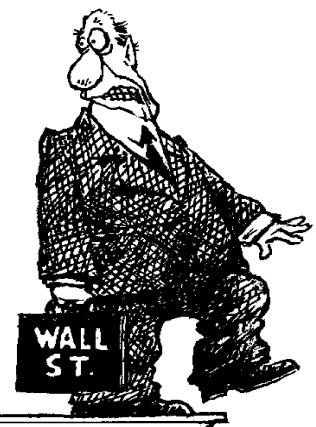
The eight-member commission has four Democrats, a Republican and three independents, including Berry. The balance gradually shifts as a new administration gets to appoint commissioners to six-year terms. During Florida hearings, Berry called Harris' testimony about her role in the election "laughable" and ridiculed state officials who said they weren't aware of complaints in the contested election.

Political scientist Roger Wilkins, a close friend, says: "I love Mary. I would call her lots of good things, but I wouldn't call her a diplomat."

"I think she's had an agenda when she came down," said Van Poole, a veteran Florida Republican. "She was on a political witch hunt."

Berry's supporters say Berry has no choice but to speak bluntly. "The commission doesn't have a lot of teeth. That's why you need somebody like Mary," said political scientist Ron Walters of the University of Maryland. "She brings a lot of attention to the commission's work that it ordinarily would not receive."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers polling and politics for The Associated Press.



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## My cupboards certainly are well stocked

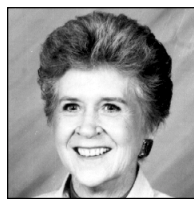
I don't know about you, but I've been thinking about shopping.

"Nothing new about that!" you say? Yes, I know that most women think about shopping a lot. I admit I used to, but lately I'm beginning to realize what my mother-in-law was feeling when she said that stores like Wal-Mart and K-mart were just "too big!" Sometimes I'd rather pay more for an item in a small store than walk a long distance to find it in a big one.

And have you ever considered the choices we have? Sometimes I think that we have too many choices. Twenty-three different laundry soaps just seems a bit too many. Ninety-five varieties of chocolate - now really! Maybe you like to choose, but sometimes I'd just like one or two to pick from.

Maybe it's the beginning of the "return-to-childhood stage" of my life. And nothing is much more frustrating than to find a product you like, only to have it discontinued or "improved" the next time you want to buy it.

In thinking about shopping, I realize that I just don't care if Sears has a sale going or not; there's always going to be another one. It does make me



**lorna  
g. t.**

• commentary

sad that a store with a 128-year-tradition of providing to the American public is closing its doors forever.

When I was living overseas with my air force husband, Montgomery Ward's catalog kept us in touch with home and with items that were unavailable in England. Then catalog shopping sort of went "out of vogue," only to return lately. I warn you, don't order from a catalog now, or you will soon be receiving twenty different companies' mailings - trying to entice you to buy from them, too.

I've decided that I am a spastic shopper.

No, I don't go jerking my shopping cart down the aisles. I buy spastically.

My mind will get set on one item that I need, and when I find it on sale, I buy many, so I won't have

to think about that again soon. The good side is that I seldom have to make mad dashes to the store to get something.

I got used to buying in quantity when my children lived at home, and my spastic shopping is the hold-over from those days. With only one in the house, things last longer, but I still have insane periods of "stocking up."

My children would probably go into spasms of laughter to see my stockpiles. Checking my cupboards, I see I have five cans of tuna, 10 bottles of shampoo and conditioner, four toothbrushes, six 2-liter bottles of soda, and 10 reams of paper - just to name a few things. Well, I'm sure you're getting the idea.

Please don't think I'm eccentric; I was taught to be thrifty. I've always been proud of my sensible purchasing habits, even if they seem strange to someone else.

I admit I buy items "spastically." I've lived in my present home almost four years, and so far I'm still using the trash bags and dryer sheets that I moved here with me. Don't laugh! For the first time since I moved, I'm watching for a sale on toilet paper.

## There is a knack to getting lost in Washington

We visited Washington last week and my lasting impressions will be metal detectors and being lost.

I was 16 the last time I was in the capitol, sightseeing with my parents.

This time I was all grown up and I was supposed to know what I was doing. I didn't, but I can fake it pretty well after all these years of being lost and confused.

We went through the metal detectors at the airport, when we entered the room where President Bush was speaking, when we went to visit our congressmen and senators, when we entered the Capitol and (best of all) when we visited the National Aquarium. Then, of course, we got the treatment again at the airport.

I passed all but one when my badge, which I thought was plastic, set the alarm off.

Steve couldn't get through anything without practically undressing. If it wasn't his badge, it was the brads on his shoes, his pocket change or the metal back of his notebook. He was the tin man as far as the metal detectors were concerned.



**cynthia  
haynes**

• open season

None of the museums we went to had detectors and all were free. We saw some of the greatest accomplishments of the American people at the Smithsonian buildings and wonderful art at the National Gallery.

It cost \$3 each to get into the aquarium, which is in the basement of the Commerce Building — thus the metal detector at the door. The biggest draw was four small alligators, which stared at us without moving until we went away and then went into frenzied activity until we returned. I wouldn't want to play Statue with them critters. They can out-stare a cat.

The aquarium is neither large nor modern. It was last updated in the 1930s and, while it has been painted and new signs put up, it is small, cramped

and not up to modern standards. On the other hand, it's got plenty of fish and only costs \$3 to get in. I think that Denver's is around \$14 a head.

Washington is a maze. I think I read somewhere that it was laid out like Paris, which explains a lot about the French.

I was lost most of the time. I walked around for several days with a map in my hands — sometimes it was even right side up. I finally gave up and took a cab most places I wanted to go. It was more expensive but I got there and home again.

Of course, there was the problem of the museums. They are all huge, with rooms and passages going every which way. I got lost in almost every one of them. Most of the time this was OK, but the day I was supposed to catch a plane and I couldn't even find the door (Steve was at a different museum), I became a little panicky.

Those places need colored lines on the floor. Follow the red line to the exit. Follow the green line to the exhibits. Follow the blue line to the bathroom. Follow the black line if you never want to find your way out.

## Serving high tea and old songs with the elderly

I pick up a bouquet of flowers on my way to meet Sister Patty Campbell in the Tenderloin — San Francisco's notorious pocket of crime. Today is her 25th anniversary with the Sisters of Mercy, and she is celebrating by serving high tea to the elderly women she ministers to every day.

Inside the Madonna Residence, a low-income facility run by the St. Anthony Foundation, the tables are draped with lace and linen borrowed from Sister Patty's friends and family for the afternoon. Tiny bouquets of roses and daisies sprout from delicate teacups in the center of each table. Up front, silver trays of scones, marmalade, petit fours, cream puffs, Florentine lace cookies, strawberries and teapots filled with Earl Grey tea stretch the length of a table that, on most days, sits in the library across the hall.

The place looks like the tearoom at the Ritz. Sister Patty remembered what the founder of the order, Catherine McAuley, had said on her deathbed: "Make sure the sisters have a comfortable cup of tea when I am gone." So high tea at three o'clock seemed the perfect way to mark the day.

At 2:45, Frances is already settled into a chair against the wall. Two thick smears of black mascara cover her eyelids from her lashes to her brows, as if she is about to take the stage in Cabaret. She wears a new wig for the occasion, a shoulder-length cascade of curls in warm blonde. She shows me the old wig, stuffed into a plastic bag tied to her walker.

"I got tired of platinum," she says. Frances is 80 and used to sing in a German beer garden in San Francisco. "People in show business always wear wigs."

Next to Frances, Connie takes a pastry from every platter that passes but eats nothing. Her eyes scan the room. She looks worried, the way she did when she showed up for the party with a gift bag and Sis-



**joan  
ryan**

• commentary

ter Patty still had to coax her from the hallway into the room.

The women here, including Sister Patty, walked different life paths to arrive in this room. They now find themselves a loose family, buffering each other against the loneliness and poverty and whispered fears that seem to rise like vapor from the low babbings and grimy sleeping bags outside on San Francisco's Golden Gate Avenue.

"Where troubles melt like lemon drops away above the chimney tops..."

Frances sings to Sister Patty. A young San Francisco State student, interning at the Madonna Residence, notices that Eva, at 96 years old the frailest woman in the room, is getting agitated, perhaps because she can't hear Frances very well. The intern rises from her seat and sits on the floor by the woman's feet, her elbow resting familiarly on the woman's chair, like a granddaughter at a family gathering.

Sister Patty tells me later that two-thirds of the residents suffer from mental illness: depression, paranoia, dementia. "Most are functional, but for some, this is their entire world," she says. But she has never been happier. "I gain so much wisdom working with the elderly."

Back in the lounge, a St. Anthony's executive is leading a sing-a-long. "When you're smiling, when you're smiling, the whole world smiles with you..."

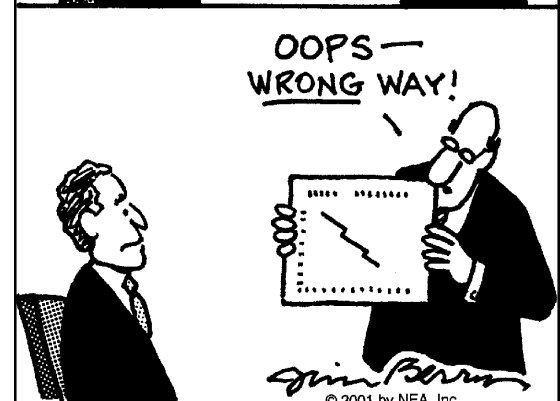
I put away my notebook and sing songs I haven't

heard in years. I can hear Frances from across the room, belting out the words.

Then I notice Connie beside her. She still looks worried, but her lips are moving, singing as softly as a prayer.

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### berry's world



## The Goodland Daily News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: [daily@nwkansas.com](mailto:daily@nwkansas.com). Advertising questions can be sent to: [gdnadv@nwkansas.com](mailto:gdnadv@nwkansas.com)

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$22; six months, \$38; 12 months, \$72. By mail in Kansas, Colorado: three months, \$28; six months, \$50; 12 months, \$95. (All tax included.) Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$25; six months, \$40; 12 months, \$75.

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