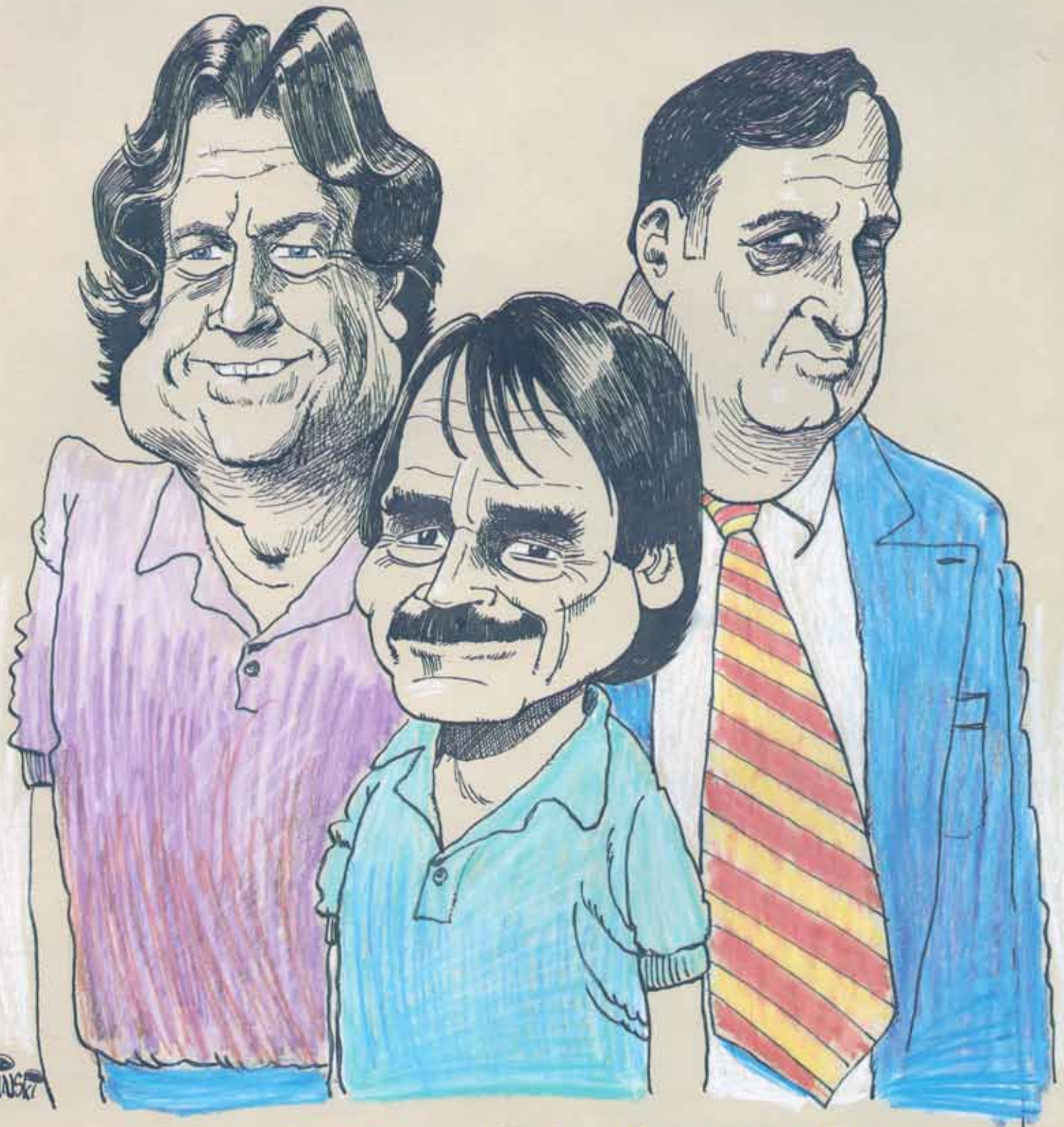


McClatchy

InnerView

July/August 1987

Volume 4, Number 4



Wisehart, Dexter and Walters



Dan Walters, The Sacramento Bee's political columnist, has been a force to be reckoned with in California since he began his column for a rival newspaper in 1981. Three years ago he brought his resources, his skill and his followers to The Bee. In his long career, Walters, 43, has worked at nearly every newspaper job from copy boy to editor at papers in Eureka, Hanford, Oregon and Sacramento. Most of his time, he says, is spent gathering information. His daily columns — he has written 1,700 of them — take but 30 minutes to write and 15 minutes more to trim to exact length. They are syndicated to 37 California newspapers. He is also the author of a book, "The New California."

I've been in this business 27 years. I started when I was 16 years old. When I was a senior in high school, I got a job as a copy boy in Eureka. I went to high school during the day and worked on the paper at night. I turned down a full National Merit Scholarship because I liked working on the newspaper. Then, having turned down the scholarship, I said with perfect logic, "If I turned down a scholarship to college, there's not much point in finishing high school." So I dropped out of high school with two classes to finish. I had a straight-A average, maybe one B. But at the time, other things were more important — social life, playing poker, working on the newspaper, having parties, hanging around.

I finished up one of the courses. To this day, I lack one required class to graduate from high school. You know what that class is? Civics.

I kind of represent the last of the old breed in the newspaper business. Most of the people I knew in the business when I was a kid were not college graduates. In those days, the newspaper business was not a profession; it was more of a trade, almost a calling. It had an entirely different social standing. It was composed mostly of poor people or people who came from the wrong side of the tracks. It was not a gentleman's profession.

The men were hard-drinking. I wasn't much of a drinker, but I played in the all-night poker games. That's where I learned to play poker, in the newsroom. I took a master's degree in newsroom poker.

Newsrooms weren't like insurance offices the way they are now. They were scummy, cruddy places with windows you couldn't see out of.

I went to work for the Sacramento Union in 1973. I was their Stockton bureau. My quota was 12 stories a day. I covered everything — police, City Council, schools. I took pictures. I write awfully fast. You learn how after you've been in this business a long time.

The ironic thing was, when I went to work for the Union I intended to stay only a short time. I had been an editor for seven years and I wanted to do editing. I liked being the boss. I've always been a very independent person. I prefer to be on my own, either in charge or solitary.

I loved being a police reporter. In the old days a police reporter used to be able to run with the cops. He could talk to the prisoners. I would just go back in the jail and ask some prisoner, for example, why he killed his wife.

Police reporting isn't fun any more. The fun of this business is watching it happen. Whatever it is. It's being there. I don't like to write about things that I don't personally know something about. I've never been one of those people who can just sit in the office and make phone calls. It's a lot more fun to be able to get into the grittiness of it — smell it, as it were.

Politics is no different. It has a lot of things in common with being a police reporter.

One of the reasons I wanted to write a column on politics was that I felt the traditional story form did not leave much room for the "why" of politics. The traditional story form, when things have to be attributed, almost forces you to accept what politicians do at face value.

As a columnist, you have to be innately curious about how things work and why things work, about how the machine of government and politics works, about why crime takes place, why somebody commits a crime and why somebody else doesn't. The why of things is not very much gone into when you think about it because the why of something is very difficult to figure out.

With a column you can make that next leap and say, "Therefore, this is why this has happened." You can make deductions and take a lot of things seemingly disconnected to one another and build a relationship between them. It's important for the reader to understand how everything fits into context.

I spend a lot of my time just hanging around the Capitol, poking my head in here and there — I call it creative loitering. If I see two or three heavyweight lobbyists together in town, I figure something must be going on. I pick up columns out of just seeing things, dropping in and listening for a while.

I don't think you can report by scheduled events — you let the politics dictate to you if you do that. You have to make your own agenda. Sometimes I think college-trained journalists have missed out on that. There's so much emphasis on the technique of writing and the techniques of the business and professionalism, just the idea of having the nose for news gets lost in there somewhere.

I think time spent hanging around is time well-spent. I become acquainted with people at a personal level. I meet someone and then I become a real person in his mind. Down the line, one month, a year, five years from now, if he comes across something he thinks somebody ought to know about, I'm the guy he calls. You have to go out and cultivate that. Covering the stories and writing the story are only about 10 percent of the business. Ninety percent is finding out about it in the first place — hanging around, developing sources, developing knowledge.

The best tool of my trade is my retentive memory. I could sit down today and write most of the big stories I've ever written as a reporter right now — details, names, places, events — without checking notes or anything. I remember most of my big stories, where they played on the page, what the headlines said.

I use about one notebook a year. I don't like to take notes. I hate tape recorders. You never develop the texture of what's going on. A lot of stories that come out are technically accurate, but they really miss the point because the person hasn't really taken the time to find out what is really happening, the context of what is really happening.

I enjoy games. I've always liked games. Politics is a game of cat and mouse. It's war without guns. You try to figure out what the politicians are doing and you try to figure it out before anybody else figures it out. If you treat it like a game, then it's fun.

It's a Symbol of a System

To Walter Zelman, Assembly Bill 1500 is an important symbol.

Zelman is director of California Common Cause and campaigns tirelessly for the reform of legislative politics.

He contends, with the weight of massive anecdotal and statistical evidence behind him, that there is an expanding connection between the dollars that flow from special interest groups into legislators' campaign treasuries and those legislators' votes on bills that affect those interests' financial standing.

Zelman's ultimate goal would be an overhaul of legislative campaign financing that would wean politicians from their addiction to those private interest dollars and substitute public financing of campaigns.

To embarrass the Legislature into passing a campaign reform program and/or to generate the political atmosphere for a reform initiative, Zelman pores over financial records and voting records and issues a constant stream of reports that demonstrate the connection between money and politics.

That does not make him an especially popular figure in the halls of the Capitol because politicians don't like having someone — a Zelman, a journalist or any other citizen — suggest that their actions are less than pristine. They might have to explain some of those actions to voters someday.

But Zelman plugs along, testifying at hearings, staging press conferences and otherwise making a nuisance of himself.

To Zelman, AB 1500 is a symbol of the unhealthy relationship between moneyed interests and legislative action. The bill, the latest version of one that has kicked around the Capitol for a few years, would engrave into law the monopolistic marketing agreements that cover the wholesaling of beer in California, about a \$4 billion-a-year industry, and bring monopoly to that small segment of the beer market that now operates on competitive, free enterprise principles.

There is, as Zelman and other critics contend, no reason for AB 1500 to pass except that the very influential California Beer Wholesalers Association wants it to pass and the association is among the heavier contributors to campaign war chests — more than \$300,000 per year. Despite the smoke screen of self-serving "information" thrown up by the proponents, the bill can only enhance the economic position of a few hundred big beer wholesalers and, if anything, work against the interests of millions of beer drinkers. State-sanctioned and unregulated monopolies inevitably produce higher prices.

Last year, an unusual combination of free enterprise Republicans and pro-consumer Democrats axed the beer monopoly bill in the Assembly Ways and Means Committee after it had passed the Senate.

The new version hit Ways and Means again this week and this time it was passed as the coalition broke down on both sides.

Zelman testified against the bill, as did consumer advocates and representatives of retail stores. He was subjected to a tongue-lashing by one assemblyman, Democrat Steve Peace, who was, he said,

incensed that Zelman had the temerity to take the issue to his district. Somehow, Peace equated that perfectly legitimate form of political action with "blackmail." Implicitly, at least, Peace was saying that his constituents should remain ignorant about his actions in Sacramento unless he chooses to tell them something.

And Assemblyman Michael Roos, who was presiding over the hearing, treated Zelman and other critics with ill-disguised contempt and rudeness.

The behind-the-scenes maneuvering over AB 1500 was intense, with incredible pressure being placed on Democrats to vote with Roos and some others from the Democratic leadership who had committed themselves to this anti-consumer, pro-monopoly legislation. Some resisted, others did not, but enough caved in to break the coalition and give the bill enough votes to move to the floor. A few Republicans broke ranks as well.

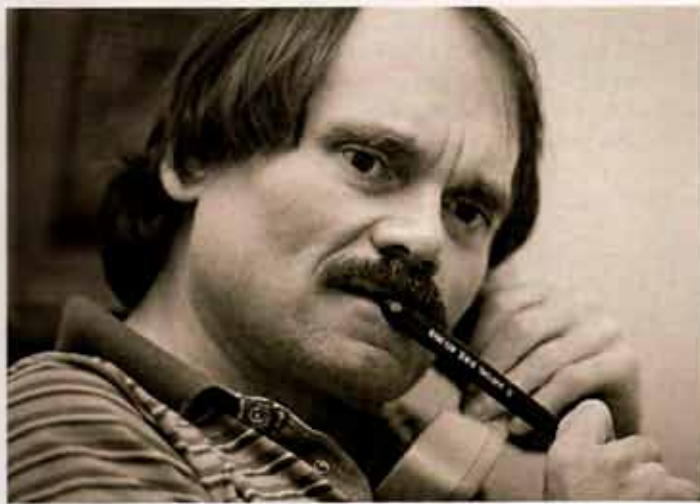
Zelman believes that AB 1500 is not only a symbol of how money and politics become intertwined but a test of whether there is sufficient zeal among political reformers and the public on the issue to change an increasingly corrupt system.

"If we can't stop this bill, we can't stop anything around here," says Zelman.

So far, anyway, despite its obvious public policy flaws and its blatant benefits for one narrow group of businesses, that has not happened.

The "beer baron bill," as many have dubbed it, continues to roll through the Legislature.

— Dan Walters



Pete Dexter, slight, grave and deceptively humble in appearance, doesn't look the part of a fighter. But The Sacramento Bee's local columnist punches hard with his words against the injustices and ineptitude he sees around him. Dexter's columns run three times a week in The Bee and appear across the country through McClatchy News Service. Dexter, 43, worked as a reporter in Florida and at the Philadelphia Daily News and was a columnist at the Daily News before coming to The Bee. He has written two books, "God's Pocket" and "Deadwood," recently released in paperback. He also pumped gas in Florida. He has been at The Bee a year.

It's been a long year. I'm in the middle of writing a very difficult book and I lost 120 pages of it off the computer. I got some fragments back, but fragments don't mean anything in themselves. A book doesn't fit together like that. I had to redo two months of work. I have no idea what things I'd lost. I just know I got to the same end point from the same beginning point.

The integrity of a book comes from the integrity of the sentences. To me, that's what writing's about. The thing that's got to have value for the book to have value is the individual sentences. You've got to be able to take a sentence out of the middle of that book and it should be able to stand up. A lot of people disagree with that, but that's how I look at what writing is: To me, it's sentences.

Well, I mean I like nouns. I like the names of things. I like uncomplicated kind of talk. I don't like tricks. It's a hard thing to explain. "Deadwood" is a fairly complex book: Things go on in there intentionally worked on a couple of levels. But I think if you do that by writing complicated sentences or by purposely being obtuse . . . look, things are hard enough to understand when you say them clear.

I never read a book until I was 20, maybe 21 years old. I just wasn't interested. One of the first things I did read was a little Robert Frost. Back in high school, they made you memorize "The Road Not Taken." That stuff stuck with me where everything else didn't. When I finally did pick up a book and read it all the way through and see

that that was possible, the next book I picked up was Robert Frost. Then the thought occurred to me that I might like to do something like that. Not as good. I never aspired to do as well as Robert Frost because I don't think anybody could. But I had some insight for some reason of what went into those poems. I have no idea why, but I could see it a little bit.

I wrote some poems myself, which weren't very good. The National Endowment of the Arts gave me a grant to write poetry. I was 22 or 23. I knew pretty quick that was nothing I wanted to do on a full-time basis. It's the hardest kind of writing there is. It's real delicate: You have to be so careful. I didn't want to spend that much time making something perfect. I want to be able to get something about right and do more of it.

I met Gregory (Favre) when we worked together at the West Palm Beach Post. I was a reporter, sort of. I think I must have written three stories in two years. Greg was the kind of person that . . . he'd come and say, "Do you think you could work a little faster?" He just has an instinct not to push. Greg doesn't stand over your head cracking a whip.

I was perfectly content to let Greg work 70 hours a week. I figured he was working 40 for him and 30 for me.

Greg left West Palm Beach because they made him endorse Nixon. I left too. We went on to Daytona Beach. I stayed for two months, he stayed for six. The people running it were crazy. Greg went on to television. I went on to pumping gas. I think I had the better job.

The very best reporters are something I'm just in awe of. I wasn't the best writer at Palm Beach; this guy named Dan Geringer was. I wasn't the best writer at the gas station, either, because they hired Dan Geringer there, too. And I wasn't the best writer at the Philadelphia Daily News. He's there, too. That guy follows me everywhere.

I became a columnist at the Philadelphia Daily News. I was a reporter there for a couple years, and not a good one, and they didn't know what to do with me so they made me a columnist and that worked a little bit.

The first thing you need to do to do what I do is you have to establish your enemies. You have to let them know up front you don't like the way they are. I don't like SMUD (Sacramento Municipal Utility District). I don't like their name. I don't like anything about them. I'm probably not one of the District Attorney's favorite people here, but everything I write about him I think is true. He's not some sore on mankind. I don't think the man's dishonest. I think he's mediocre. Then you got that wimp running the Rocklin police department. I don't like him. I don't like what he does. I'm not crazy about the whole administration up in Auburn. And I don't like lawyers, usually.

The thing this town has, because of its huge bureaucracy, is a lot of dissatisfied medium-size people stepping on a lot of little people just because they can. That's a rich field. There's a lot of stuff there to write about. I react to it. If I can't react to it, then I can't write it to make anybody else react to it.

I have a deep and natural revulsion to power and authority. If there's nothing there besides a title, you don't have authority over me. When I see someone taken advantage of, that offends something in me. I don't love everybody that's poor, but I love them a lot more than most people I find running things.

Usually the reason you get a column is because you're a better writer than reporter. A lot of what you see in columns is people writing for themselves. They show off and turn colors around in nature and think that's good writing. The language should be the same as you find in the rest of the paper. After all, it goes in the trash with the rest of the paper.

You hardly ever see adverbs or adjectives in my columns. You have to get over softening things. If you soften things, you also weaken them. You either commit yourself to a sentence or you don't.

If people are sitting around trying to figure out what your column means, you didn't write a good column. The aim of it is to entertain. People have got to react to what you write or why have it? Some columnists want to sit there and contemplate the cosmos, but you've got to be on the streets with the people.

I feel like the obligation of this column is that I'm here mostly to entertain, but I'm here also to say what's on my mind. If you're going to bring it up, you ought to have the courage to say it all the way. If you can't do that, then find something else to write about.

A Reasonably Fluid Solution To the Dry Days at SMUD

There was a small story buried deep in the local section of this newspaper earlier in the month that a woman named Mary Loftus, correctly guessing that I had not gotten that far into the paper, was nice enough to cut out and send.

The story concerned a lawsuit being filed by the Organization of SMUD Employees, asking the Superior Court to direct the utility to repeal its policy of not allowing employees to drink liquor during breaks for lunch or dinner. Maybe even breakfast — the suit only said "meals," it didn't say which ones.

The suit also asked for \$2.16 million in lost drinking time since the no-liquor rule went into effect last July.

The attorney for SMUD employees said, "We've tried to talk to these people (SMUD management) about this matter, and they ignored it."

The attorney for SMUD management said they hadn't either ignored it. His side of it was that, "They (the employees) have been adamant that there should be no rule about drinking or we should pay for lunch breaks. Frankly, I don't think people should be paid for not drinking at lunchtime."

And so there you are. The perfect company, the perfect union.

The perfect issue.
"And all this time," Ms. Loftus wrote, "I've been blaming my rate increases on Rancho Seco."

There is a lot to be said for both sides, of course, but I think the most compelling issue is that you would not want something called SMUD telling you when to drink ei-

ther. I mean, the people are obviously incapable of running a nuclear reactor, what business have they got trying to run your lunch?

And if they do run your lunch, they ought to pay you, right? Overtime — because as soon as you're finished with lunch, you go back to work and put in your regular workday tinkling with public relations or melt-down models or new rate projections — I am assuming those are not the same job — or whatever else they tinkle with at SMUD.

The union filing the suit, keep in mind, represents mostly white-collar workers, who are too educated to be over there waiting for nuclear accidents at Rancho Seco. Which, while we are on the subject, brings up something a lot of us not native to this area have wondered about for a long time.

Is Rancho Seco "ranch sicko" in Spanish?

Either way, obviously it would be irresponsible for the company to allow drinking there, because less-than-vigilant work could become expensive. And while I am quick to admit that I don't completely understand the complex workings of a nuclear reactor, I do know that we don't want any of those guys carrying the little bombs around feeling too frisky.

The first thing you know, the federal government's getting SMUD to hire women carriers, and the next thing you know somebody's showing off.

But we are talking here about white-collar lunches, and the right to drink anytime you're not on the clock.

The company, of course, could say that they have a right to a sober employee when he is on the clock.

But then the union would say SMUD has some of the most dedicated employees anywhere, and a beer or two doesn't make anybody drunk.

And the company would say, fine, what about a Breathalyzer and a urine analysis after lunch?

And the union would say you can't inspect my urine because this is America, and then it would probably make some reference to the miniseries about a Soviet takeover about to air on ABC.

And none of us wants it to go that far, and luckily there is a way to head it off. All the company and the union and the Superior Court have to do is agree to be reasonable. There are, after all, some jobs where it hurts you to drink and some jobs where it helps.

Nobody, for instance, wants to hear his pilot singing "Wild Blue Yonder." Nobody wants a drunk dentist, or a drunk bartender.

A columnist, on the other hand, may occasionally write deeply under the influence and find himself being congratulated the following day on his clarity.

And so I think the rule is this: If there's something you can break or drop that isn't already broken or dropped — an airplane or a glass — don't drink. If there isn't, go ahead.

Nobody likes a messy drunk. Bringing us back to SMUD. Let them drink.

It can't get messier than it is.

— Pete Dexter