

Farewell to Doug Smith, the ‘Cheap Gourmet’ with a flair for language



Doug Smith and his wife, Polly, at their Grand Island home. The couple is leaving the area to be closer to their daughter in Cortland.

Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

- By [Colin Dabkowski](#)

The lead struck Doug Smith like the crack of a bat as his car crossed Walnut Avenue one mid-July night in 2011.

It was 9:50 p.m., and the 76-year-old sportswriter was en route from Niagara Falls’ Sal Maglie Stadium to his Grand Island home after a night of triple-duty as scorekeeper, public address announcer and beat reporter for the Niagara Power, a collegiate summer baseball team.

Facing a deadline of 10:30 p.m. for the Niagara Gazette, Smith pulled into his driveway on Hennepin Road a little after 10. He sat down at his computer and started tapping out the first line of a 420-word story about a memorable performance from a young pitcher who would go on to be signed by the Seattle Mariners:

“Rohn Pierce, the ‘Newfane Nuke,’ dropped a K-bomb on the Allegany Nitros Tuesday night.”

Advertisement

Eleven minutes later, he was done. He fired off his report, [laced with his trademark wit and older than old-school phraseology](#), with time to spare. He went to bed satisfied with another productive day as one of Buffalo’s hardest-working reporters, congratulating himself in his mind with another print-ready Doug Smith lead:

“The old fart still has it.”

Smith’s small-town sportswriting, though it has won many awards in the past, may not show up in many “best of” anthologies. His compact theater reviews, similarly witty and imbued with an urgency lifted straight from “The Front Page” even if sometimes relegated to the back page, probably won’t catch the eye of the Pulitzer committee soon. Nor are the annals of great American food criticism likely to touch on his well-remembered stint as the Cheap Gourmet, along with his wife, Polly, for the Courier-Express and WIVB.

But make no mistake: As Doug and Polly Smith, both 80 years old, prepare to move to Cortland to be closer to their daughter after a long and varied career in local media, Western New York is losing a singularly talented voice whose prolific work has added immeasurably to the culture of the region. Nor should the centrality of Polly Smith’s contributions be downplayed in their departure, as they often shared a byline and moved as a single entity among the theaters, ballparks and restaurants of Western New York.

True to the outmoded forms of personality-driven daily journalism, Smith was a man of many nicknames.

You might know him as Rocket Man, the quick-witted columnist and theater reviewer who sprayed his semiautomatic prose across the pages of the Buffalo Rocket for the last three decades, never missing a column since he started in the mid-1980s. You might know him as the Cheap Gourmet, who sought out the area’s best dining deals with Polly, with equal parts smarm and charm. Or you might remember his stage performances in local community theater productions.

You probably don’t remember him as the Fun Ranger, his short-lived, cowboy hat-wearing alter ego on WIVB. Or as Specs, the 13-year-old scorekeeper turned sportswriter for the long-ago shuttered Jamestown Sun. But chances are you’ve read him, and chances are you’ve followed his advice.

Smith comes from the old school of daily newspaper journalism, with all its requirements for competition and economy. Everything about him is rat-a-tat-tat: His rapid-fire speech, which resolves itself in Jimmy Stewart-like upswings commensurate with his level of excitement. His pun-laden prose, which might occasionally cause an errant eye-roll, but always gets its point across. His clockwork reliability.

In a recent conversation in their Grand Island home, now littered with cardboard boxes containing years of memories in the form of old awards, yellowed correspondence and 35 pounds of fan mail stemming largely from the “Cheap Gourmet” run on WIVB, Doug and Polly Smith said they’re ready to put Western New York behind them. One of Smith’s final theater reviews, about Jewish Repertory Theatre’s production of “Bad Jews,” ran in the Buffalo Rocket last month. (The lead: “Theatrically, ‘Bad Jews’ is good news in Getzville.”)

The last few months have been an extended version of that night in 2011, when Smith fired off one of his favorite sports stories.

“It really sounds arrogant, but it almost feels like a victory lap,” he said. “And if you get through it and you come home and feel good about what happened, that’s all the victory that I need. I feel good.”

As well he should.

Smith began his long writing career in the late 1940s at age 13, when his diligent score-keeping at Jamestown’s Roseland Park for a local softball team caught the eye of a sports editor from the Jamestown Sun. When he started scribbling sports stories there, it wasn’t long before he was hired away by the Jamestown Post-Journal, “for a lofty 75 cents an hour,” and his career was off to a sprint.

From there, Smith worked his way through a series of newspaper jobs in Pennsylvania, from Boonsburg to Warren to Erie, where, as sports editor, he claims to have written 57 stories in one night. In 1968, he became the

night city editor of The Buffalo Evening News, a position that put him frequent contact with copy by veteran culture writers Ardis Smith, Terry Doran and John Dwyer. Later, with a taste for theater firmly embedded in his sportswriter makeup, he edited the Sunday arts section for the Courier-Express and finally left for WIVB in 1982, when the paper closed. Along the way, he and Polly went on dozens of television and movie junkets.

His career is littered with stories of incredible feats performed against ridiculous deadlines.

He recalled one night at WIVB in the '80s, when the final segment planned for the 6 p.m. newscast dropped at the last minute. At 5:45, he and a photographer zoomed from the station's studio on Elmwood Avenue to Memorial Auditorium, where a circus troupe was performing. They barged into a dressing room, shot about three minutes of tape with the performers, sped back to the studio and finished the piece with two commercial breaks to spare.

Another day, which Smith describes as his "greatest day in baseball," involved covering a high school baseball championship game between the Grand Island Vikings and New Hartford Spartans in Binghamton with his grandson Clark in tow.

He scribbled the story on two McDonald's Happy Meal bags and called it in from his cellphone, as a crowd gathered to watch the spectacle. "They thought I was some international sports reporter," Smith said.

Maybe not. But he got as much pleasure out of the job as any heavy-hitter, and that pleasure filtered down directly to his readers. We're lucky to have had him so long.

So what's next for Doug and Polly Smith? Asked if he would be putting down his pen in his new home in Cortland, Smith just grinned:

"I am the beat reporter for the Cortland Crush, of the New York State collegiate baseball league."