

Watching the Watchers

By Ron Marsh

His name is Montgomery.

He keeps a lonely vigil: watching The Watchers.

It was about 2:30, Sunday, October 19, a bright, warm, autumn afternoon, when I turned south off of County Highway 2 into the "Media Staging area," a block or so east of the intersection with County Highway 23 and just west of The Watchers' checkpoint. I had been there the previous Tuesday afternoon, between the noon rally in Taylorville and the 5:00 rally outside the Capitol Building in Springfield.

The Watchers were still there, as they had been on Tuesday, but their presence was no longer stifling. On Tuesday, there had been two dozen or more Watcher vehicles lining the road. This afternoon, there were only two, at times three – and no doubt another two or three at the other checkpoint about a half-mile farther east.

I left The Watchers behind and entered the Media Staging Area. (Where I hail from, we would have considered that a mighty high-falutin' name for half an acre of meadowland, but that was what The Watchers were calling it.)

Then I saw it, maybe 400 yards straight ahead: a mute symbol of proud defiance, a bright ray of hope in an otherwise bleak and oppressive scene.

From the Staging Area, the rolling farmland sloped downward, away from the road and The Watchers, then upward again. And atop that second hill – overlooking the Staging Area, the road and The Watchers – someone had parked a camper, with an American flag raised heavenward.

I had to meet the owner of that camper.

The two males and two females sitting outside the camper watched as I parked my car. As I began walking toward them, they stood up and started toward me. We met in the hollow between the hills.

I introduced myself. The portly, forty-ish man and the two teen-aged girls said "Good-bye" about as soon as they said "Hello," got into the only other car in the Staging Area, and left.

I offered my hand to the owner of the camper. "I don't believe I caught your name."

"Oh, it's Montgomery," he replied. "Sorry. I should have told you before." He shook my hand.

"That's OK," I assured him.

His hand was coarse – much coarser than mine. He wore fading work jeans, a red and blue plaid shirt and a "camo" hunting cap. He was any plumber or electrician or bricklayer that you might see at any construction site.

"Montgomery.' Is that first name or last?"

"Yeah."

That was OK, too. I could tell he was used to the question; I was satisfied with the answer.

"Could we sit and talk awhile?" I asked, nodding toward the camper.

"Sure."

We climbed the hill and entered Montgomery's "sitting room" just outside the camper. The plush carpet was trodden meadow grass. There was one blinding yellow light set firmly in the blue-sky ceiling. The furnishings were simple: two white molded-plastic chairs, a bale of straw for a couch.

I settled my 250 pounds gingerly into the flimsy plastic. "Where ya from, Montgomery?"

"From inside the camper," he said, nodding over his right shoulder. "That's about it, these days. I've been pretty much all over the country in it the last coupla years. Heard about what was happening here and just thought this would be a good place to call home for a while."

"OK." I could tell he was used to the question; I was satisfied with the answer. In these circumstances, prudence demands walls between strangers.

The camper was vintage Chevy: larger than a pickup, yet lacking the dignity to be called a motor home. It had seen many seasons and, no doubt, many miles. In spots, paint had given way to patina – if aging aluminum is noble enough to wear patina.

Affixed to the side of the camper, just behind the passenger door, was a makeshift flagpole. The gentle breeze held the flag at proud attention – not the garish, impudent pride of a half-time parade flag, but the indomitable assurance of a veteran of a thousand Iwo Jimas.

Its faded reds and blue and dingy whites were dim reminder of a glory that once was – and of the pervasive shame that now is Roby, Illinois.

The presence of both flag and camper, atop the hill and overlooking The Watchers, seemed to hallow the meadow.

Montgomery removed his cap, smoothed his hair, replaced the cap. His reddish hair seemed uncomfortably full, as if it had missed a trim or two.

"So, what's been happening?"

"Well," he said, "I think I've played my psychological game with them just about as far as I can play it. I was parked over in the Staging Area for a while. Then I moved up here. That really seemed to make them nervous. They don't seem to like it that I am up here looking down on them. We just sit here most of the time and look at each other through binoculars. And I have a video camera."

Hmmm. They charge that Shirley Allen is mentally ill...but paranoia also is a mental illness. I wondered just who should be evaluating whom.

Montgomery continued: "They came up here and asked to search the camper. I said, 'No.' Finally they told me they were going to search it anyway. I threw the keys inside and locked the door, so they would have to break in if they were going to search. Figured I might get them for something there.

"That just made them mad. One of them grabbed me and pulled my hands around behind my back, to handcuff me. As he went for his cuffs, I reminded him of the Bill of Rights and of unlawful searches and of his oath to the Constitution. I told him that what he was doing was unconstitutional and a violation of his oath.

"I don't think they liked it much, but they let me go. After they left, I had to break into my own camper to get my keys.

"Now we just watch each other.

"I'm afraid that they will ask the guy who owns the land to ask me to leave. If they do, I hope he doesn't cave in."

He removed the cap again, re-sized it and put it back on.

A reporter pulled into the Staging Area, got out of his pickup and walked toward The Watchers.

"It's so silly," Montgomery pondered. "They take down everybody's license plate number. They don't realize that the people who come here are decent, law-abiding people who are just concerned about Shirley."

Yeah. Paranoia, I thought again.

We talked for forty-five minutes or so, about the Bible and the Constitution and Shirley Allen and The Watchers.

He turned his chair once, away from the setting sun. And there was that "cap thing" every few minutes. Montgomery was a quiet man, not a grandstander. But I was certain: in his case at least, still waters surely did run deep.

Unless unpreventably hindered, or until the camper became too cold to endure, he would be there for the duration – watching The Watchers.

While we had talked, the dark clouds had been rapidly approaching. The blinding light in Montgomery's sitting-room ceiling was no more. The warm autumn breeze had turned abruptly chilly.

The man and the girls returned.

"They're back," Montgomery said. "Those are his daughters. They are home-schoolers from Decatur. He thought this would make a nice field trip for the girls, to see what was going on over here. They just went to get something to eat."

As the trio climbed the hill with their bags of Subway sandwiches and a cooler of soft drinks, I said my good-byes to Montgomery.

Then I left them to enjoy their supper.

As I headed back down County Highway 23 toward Taylorville and home, I looked one last time over my left shoulder at the rolling meadow, the "Media Staging Area" and the camper.

Mentally, I saluted the flag.

"Good-bye, Montgomery. And God be with you!"

At least The Watchers have no doubt that they, too, are being watched!

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