

A Roger Ruhl Memory/Good Story (3-29-2021)

Mr. B Rabbit



The only way I explain it is that it must have been an instance of early-onset eccentricity for a brief two-day period back in 1968.

Otherwise, why in the world would 23-year old Roger Ruhl buy a five-foot, seven-inch stuffed rabbit and then purchase an airline ticket to get him from Richmond, Va. to Morgantown, W.Va.?

In February, 1968 I was athletic publicity director at West Virginia University, working more than full-time in a job I loved and finishing undergrad studies and taking some graduate courses. The job took me to Richmond to “advance” the WVU-Richmond basketball game ... that meant

visiting with newspaper guys and radio and TV sports directors to promote the Mountaineers and the upcoming game.

I was at WTVR to do an interview the night before the game. As the sports director and I walked to the studio, I looked down a hallway and saw what appeared to be 25 or 30 big stuffed rabbits. "What are those," I asked. He replied that they were WTVR bunnies that the sales department was using in an Easter promotion ... advertisers who bought a certain number of spots got a bunny. "Gosh," I said only half-jokingly, "I'd like to have one." The sports director offered to check with the sales department to see if they would sell one to me. He called the next day and said I could buy one of the bunnies for \$23. "I'll take it," I said impulsively, not knowing the adventure that was about to unfold.

The sports director brought the rabbit to the game. As we transferred him to my rental car, he seemed bigger than I remembered.

West Virginia beat Richmond that night and the team traveling party was in good spirits as we got back to the hotel and assembled for a post-game drink or two in Athletic Director Red Brown's suite. The group included coaches Bucky Waters and Sonny Moran, trainer Whitey Gwynne, my assistant Ben Lusk, radio announcer Jack Fleming, sportswriter Mickey Furfari, myself and my new rabbit.

Had we lost, I suspect no one would have found much humor in the rabbit's presence. But after the win, everyone was in a good mood.

Athletic director Red Brown asked how I planned to get the rabbit back to Morgantown. I told him I was going to have the cheerleaders take it back ... they had driven to game.

"That won't work," said Red, "the cheerleaders left right after the game tonight."

"Oh," I said, and slowly started to process the idea that getting my five-foot, seven-inch friend back to Morgantown might pose a problem.

While the others recounted and analyzed the game, I got busy on the telephone. The first leg of the trip home was on a National Airlines flight from Richmond to Washington, D.C. I called National reservations and explained, "I would like to buy ticket on a National flight tomorrow morning." The reservationist asked if the ticket was for me. I said no and told her it was for my rabbit. She said an animal could not fly in the passenger section of the plane ... it would have to go in the pet cargo area. I explained that it was a stuffed rabbit. She said I could put it in the overhead rack. I told her I didn't think he would fit, explaining that he was five-feet, seven-inches tall. "My, you have a big rabbit," she said. She asked me hold on the line while she did some checking. When the conversation resumed, she explained that the rabbit could fly for half-price and occupy a seat, much like a cellist's cello. "Great," I said, "I'll take it."

The next morning reality began to set in. I began to wonder whether buying the rabbit had been a good idea. After checking out of the hotel, my assistant Ben Lusk and I and the rabbit headed to the taxi stand. "Airport," I said. The driver acted as if he wasn't interested in the fare and

asked, "Are you bringing that thing?" "Sure am," I said. We climbed in the back seat ... I was on the left, Ben was on the right, and the rabbit was in the middle. I often wished I could have seen the expressions on the faces of the drivers who were behind us ... the rabbit's large head and two large ears must have made for quite a sight.

At the airport, the fun began as we got in the ticketing line. When it was our turn, the woman at the counter looked up, did a double take, and said firmly, "You can't bring that thing on the plane." I replied that "My rabbit has a ticket." She scanned her list and, sure enough, there was a musical instrument among the passengers. She issued the ticket.

Once on board, I strapped the rabbit into a seat and put the Wall Street Journal on his lap. Ben and I sat across the aisle from him. He drew a lot of smiles and laughs from the boarding passengers.

At Washington's National Airport, Ben, the rabbit and I deplaned and made our way to the Lake Central Airlines counter. The ticketing agent smiled, looked at her passenger list, and saw the listing for my friend. "Does your Bunny Rabbit have a name," she asked as she got ready to hand-write his ticket. "No, not yet," I said. She replied, "Well, I'll call him Mr. B. Rabbit." The name stuck.

Word about my rabbit adventure got around in Morgantown. I was talking with a couple gals after a journalism class one day and one of them asked, "Can I come by your apartment and see your rabbit some time?"

Hmmm, I thought ... B. Rabbit, it appears you are going to be a valuable roommate ... this could be the start of a great friendship.

Epilogue ... All of this happened in 1968, and I am happy to report that B. Rabbit is alive (so to speak) and well. He spends most of his time in a protective bag in my storeroom. But every now and then – mostly at Easter time -- he makes an appearance. When he does, he is usually the life of the party.

(3/29/21)