



Looking Back *Joyce M. Tice*

You Don't Say!

When I was three years old I lived with my parents in a drafty old house just south of the village of Mainesburg. One evening my mother went out to the back room, located just off the kitchen. She told me not to follow because there was a giraffe out there. The word didn't sound quite right, but I knew what a giraffe was; I had seen pictures. I'd never seen the real thing though, and now here was one right in my own house. "I wanna see it," I told her.

"You can't see it," she responded. "It's invisible." Well, I never heard of invisible, but her explanation of the meaning of the word could not be true.

"If you can't see it," I demanded, "how do you know it's there?"

She told me she could feel it. I knew, somehow, she wasn't telling it quite straight. She was hiding something interesting for no good reason. "I wanna feel it," I told her.

"It'll make you sick," she responded as she came back and closed the door behind her. And so I neither saw nor felt the giraffe in the back room.

The older I got, the more I understood that a giraffe in Mainesburg was a very rare event indeed—something that could happen maybe once in the history of the world—and my mother had deprived me of that experience. I even told some of my elementary school classmates much later that there had been a giraffe in my house, and my mother would not let me see it. I eventually realized that the whole thing was highly unlikely, and she had probably said "draft" and not "giraffe."

Every time I tell this story I hear one in return about a childhood experience of miscomprehension resulting from a limited vocabulary. Recently a local Head Start teacher got a phone call that a load of wood chips would be delivered for the playground. One child went home and told his mother they were going to get a truckload of woodchucks for the playground.

My father grew up thinking that Gray Valley near his home was Grave Alley. It all made sense with the little lane going past the cemetery there. I used to ponder the nonsense of the line in "Jingle Bells" about the "one horse, soap, and sleigh." I sang right along, but I didn't understand it a bit. Similarly, a child once drew a nativity scene with a fat person in it. Asked for an explanation,

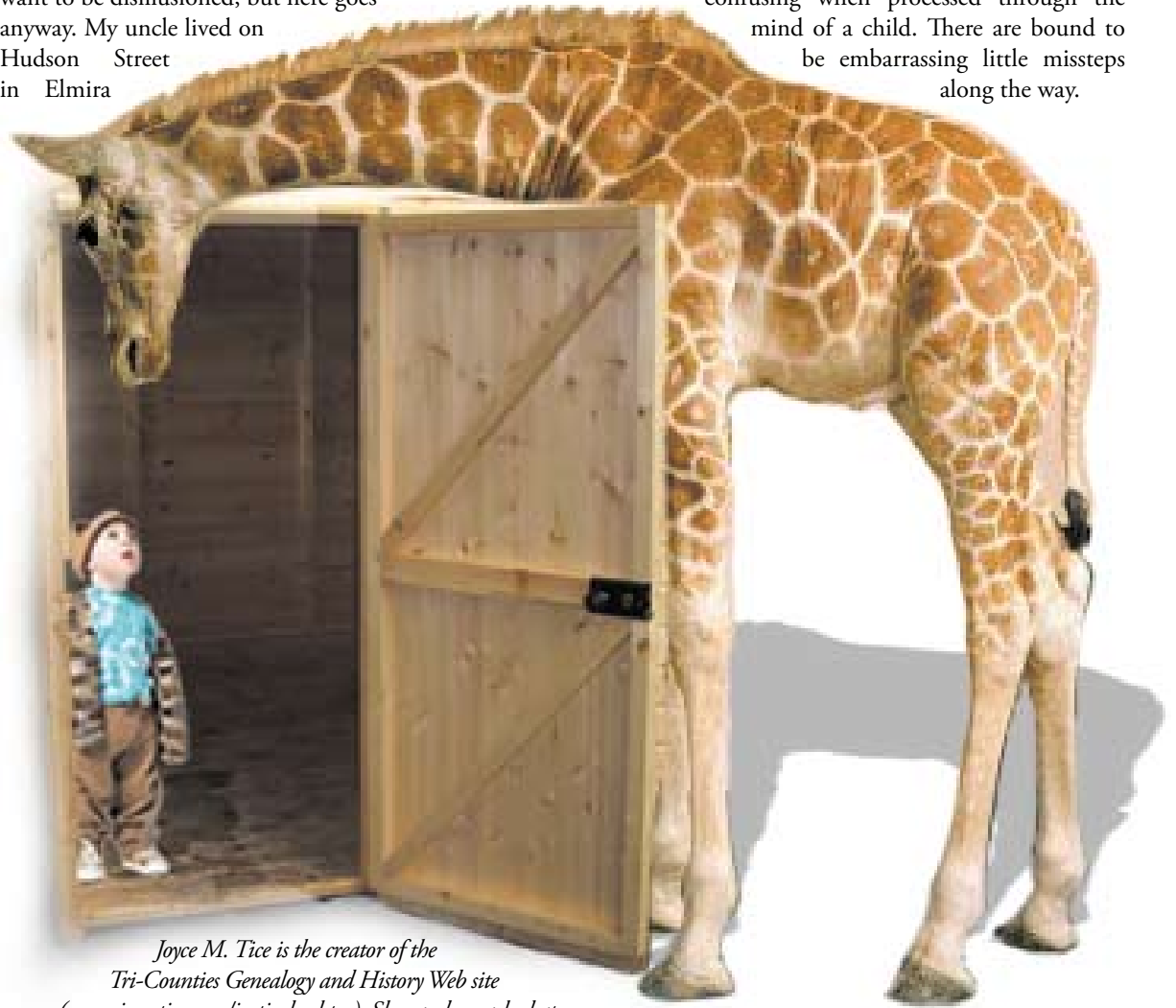
he said that it was Round John Virgin.

The mother of my friend, Sue, told her she was selfish. Sue didn't know that word and thought she must have meant silverfish. She had seen them in drains. She could not figure out why her mother called her a silverfish. Another friend learned the alphabet song and thought that elemenopee was a letter of the alphabet.

I've been advised not to tell this one again since there are some people who think I am smart and who don't want to be disillusioned, but here goes anyway. My uncle lived on Hudson Street in Elmira

when I was a child. He also collected old cars, one of which was a Hudson. I (logically) concluded that the river behind the house was the Hudson River. Years later when I was old enough to know better (if I had ever really thought about it), the flood of '72 came along. All the news was about the Chemung and Susquehanna Rivers. I was baffled wondering why they were not mentioning the Hudson River.

Ours is a complex language, made all the more confusing when processed through the mind of a child. There are bound to be embarrassing little missteps along the way.



Joyce M. Tice is the creator of the Tri-Counties Genealogy and History Web site (www.joycetice.com/ljmtindex.htm). She can be reached at lookingback@mountainhomemag.com.

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