

Mining the news

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

To sustain a weekly column over a 40-year period requires paying attention—and getting more than a little help from others. Columnists' eyes are always open for some entertaining tidbit. Their paws are poised, ready to pounce on ideas and nuggets of information. People know that a huge network of necessarily anonymous readers send in those church bulletin typos and linguistic grotesqueries that other readers enjoy. Of course, relatives and families help supply the pouncers searching for subjects. The Marty mail from sons and daughters slips many ideas my way.

I always look forward to the mail from Davenport, Iowa, where son Peter pastors a church. Here in Chicago, we thoroughly read three New York and Chicago newspapers daily, but find most items either too grim or, if comic, too brutal and crude to inspire a column for this family magazine. But Davenport's *Quad-City Times* gleans material the biggies overlook—and puts them into the hands of a headline writer who deserves a Pulitzer. Here's a sample from a post-holiday week's bundle:

“MAN SAVED BY VACUUM CLEANER.” Now there's a must-read item. It seems that a Tokyo man choking on a sticky, glutinous rice cake was saved by his daughter, who sucked it out of his throat with a vacuum cleaner. Family members of this 70-year-old tried to get the glob out with their fingers. No luck. No “mochi,” which is the name of the New Year's treat he was eating. “Every year a handful of mostly elderly Japanese die after choking on mochi rice cakes,” the article informs us. Paramedics comment that vacuum cleaners might be useful at such times, but “I wouldn't recommend it to everyone because it's tricky.” *Consumer Reports*, take note.

“MAN BEATS HIMSELF UP IN A ROBBERY RUSE.” At a Turtle Lake, Wisconsin, casino a Minnesota man roughed himself up and complained to police that he was robbed. His bumps and bruises were convincing. But surveillance cameras had caught him beating himself on a light pole. Now he faces charges.

“MAN PLEADS GUILTY TO OFFENSE WHILE FLYING.” An Annapolis pilot was arrested for “drunken flying.” He had three open whiskey bottles beside him when he decided to land on a road. After he came to a stop, he “asked bystanders to stop traffic so he

could take off again.”

Not all the headlines begin with “Man.” There’s also “PROTESTERS IN SANTA SUITS VANDALIZE STORE”; “TOWN RINGS IN 2001 WITH BIG WEENIE”; “ELECTION PITS MARK KERN VS. MARK KERN”; and “COURT WILL HEAR SLEEPY LAWYER CASE.”

Here are the stories behind them: In Golden, Colorado, protesters dressed like Santa sprayed men’s suits with pepper spray, causing thousands of dollars in damage. Their cause was good, as the notes they left behind explained. Nicaraguan workers were exploited by the manufacturers of these clothes.

In Elmore, Ohio, people cooked up a ten-foot-long sausage, using a drain pipe as a mold, to drop from the skies at midnight on New Year’s Eve.

Mark Kerns come in twos in Belleville, Illinois. Both ran for mayor. We suppose Mark Kern won that election.

In Livingston, Texas, the lawyer of a man on trial for murder kept falling asleep. That may be news in Iowa, but it’s not news in Texas, where death row is peopled with criminals who have been thus served.

The dull New York and Chicago papers have just arrived, and I must stop writing in order to trudge through them.