

I love pencils. Plain old pencils that write in soft black. They always work. No gloppy ink blobs. No smudgy fingers, ruined shirts or pants pockets.

Pencils are such a simple, almost perfect tool. And even the best ones are cheap. Heck, you can buy a dozen of them for less than a dollar from places like Staples. And, if you want to splurge at an art supply store, a dozen drawing pencils works out to about \$1 each. Pencils are a very cheap treat.

If a pencil breaks, it's only a matter of seconds before it's sharpened and working like new again. With broken pens, you just throw them out, even if you haven't used up all the ink.

Despite the pencil's clear superiority, they are usually relegated to second-class status. You can't write a check or sign a legal document with one. The only time they are the required instrument is when taking the SAT's or any other fill-in-the-circles test.

I like making lists with pencils. I use them until the points are soft and elongated. Sometimes I write until there's almost nothing left and the wood surrounding the graphite gets in the way. When that happens, you have to hold the pencil at about a 30-degree angle to the paper to get a mark. Those writ-



Flotsam and Jetsam

By Donna Drago

ings look childlike—as if made by a chubby-fisted second grader, who's just learning penmanship.

I love pencil erasers, and wouldn't dream of using a pencil that didn't have that wonderful pink rubber nub stuck on the end with a metal clamp called a ferrule. I don't use the eraser very often, but it's always comforting to know that I can have a "do-over" if I need one.

The only problem with pencils, as I see it, are pencil sharpeners.

The simplest ones—a tiny chunk of plastic with a hole and a blade—are messy and you have to stand over a garbage can to use them. One step up is the sharpener that has a little clear hood over the basic mechanism. Those tend to pop apart and spill dust over everything, so I tend to stand over the garbage can when I use them as well. I once saw a sharpener that was shaped like a human nose.

You stuck the pencil up one of the nostrils. That was just disgusting.

I hate the noise of an electric pencil sharpener. They are frightening. And, I hate the overly sharp point they make. The only thing good about electric sharpeners is that it's possible to take a brand-new pencil and push it into the sharpener until it's just a point with an eraser on the end. All of this takes less than 10 seconds and it's truly thrilling to witness. But once you've used the electric menace, it takes days of doodling and list-making before the pencil is back to a softer, usable version of itself.

Back when I was in elementary school, every classroom had a fabulous pencil sharpener. It was usually screwed to a windowsill or doorframe. It was made of steel, meant to last a lifetime, and had mean looking blades that spun around inside like a push-mower. It was perfect. I can still remember the smell of pencil shavings that emanated from the sharpener. I used to like to sit near it and listen to the grinding sound it made. But I always felt bad for the lefties because they usually couldn't use it. It took a deft, right hand to get the smooth action that resulted in a perfectly sharpened pencil.

I've tried to buy one of these sharpeners to put on a windowsill or doorframe in my house, but the ones they sell now are mostly plastic and the blades don't stay sharp, and there's a jerky motion to the crank handle that just doesn't cut it. The crank should move just like

a finely tuned fishing reel—perfectly smooth. I guess I'll have to scout antique shops to find just the right one.

Once you've used a pencil sharpener on cosmetic sticks—like eyeliner—you can never go back to sharpening graphite pencils. The soft, waxy eyeliner usually leaves a nasty smear or chunk in the very back of the sharpener, but you won't see it until you try to use a pencil you've sharpened in the same unit and get that blue or green streak alongside the graphite mark. Just buy two or more and keep them separate.

Pencils have a long and interesting history. Way, way back, the Greeks and Romans used real chunks of lead to make marks on papyrus. But when graphite, the true "lead" in pencils, was discovered in the north of England in the 1560s it quickly became the writing mineral of choice.

In 1795, a French chemist who was also an officer in Napoleon's army, Nicholas Conté, improved the pencil further when he invented the process by which powdered graphite is mixed with clay and fired in a kiln to create the writing material we still use today. By varying the ratio of clay to graphite, Conté was able to produce pencils that wrote in different intensities, and also developed the alpha-numeric system that tells how hard or soft they were.

There's a Website for pencil junkies called penciltalk.org. Visit them for everything you'd ever want to know about the pencil.

Sheep shearing is a sure sign of spring

Celebrate Spring at Watson Farm's annual Sheep Shearing Day on Saturday, May 10, from noon to 4 p.m.

Located in Jamestown, Historic New England invites the public to this special pre-season Open Farm Day at Watson Farm. It is a great opportunity to watch sheep being shorn, meet the baby lambs and see baby chicks. New this year is the "Watson Farm Quest" a hunt for clues that will take visitors through the farms scenic pastures and down to the shores of Narragansett Bay. The Quest was created by Jamestown students who will be on hand to get everyone started.

Spinners and weavers will demonstrate their skills in the fiber arts. Admission is \$10 per car. Parking is limited.

The Watson Farm is a 265-acre working farm located at 455 North Main Rd. It is owned by Historic New England, a museum of cultural history. Historic New England preserves, interprets and collects buildings, landscapes and objects reflecting New England life from the 17th century to the present for the enjoyment of all.

The Watson Farm opens for the season in June. The hours are June 1 to Oct. 15, Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$3 for seniors, \$2 for students, six and under are free.

Bird count changes meeting location

The 2008 Conanicut Island Spring Bird Count will be held on Sunday, May 18, from 6:30 a.m. to noon.

Birding enthusiasts should meet at the Jamestown Town Hall, 93 Narragansett Ave. This is a change in location from previous bird counts.

For more information, call Candy Powell at 423-1492 or Evelyn Rhodes at 423-1254.

Animal league celebrates 25 years

The Potter League for Animals is holding a 25th anniversary Humane Education Celebration on Thursday, May 8, at Thompson Middle School in Newport.

For 25 years, the Potter League has continually taught an academically-based humane curriculum at Aquidneck Island schools. The public is invited at 4 p.m. for a short program and reception celebrating this milestone year.

As part of the program, the Portsmouth Community Theater will present a short reenactment of the very first educational program presented by the League in 1928. There will also be an overview of the Potter League's education programs, a presentation on pet overpopulation by children from the Martin Luther King Center and an announcement of the winners of our Humane Poster Contest for students in grades 1 through 4.

For more information, call Lynne Mallonee-Sabel at 846-0592.

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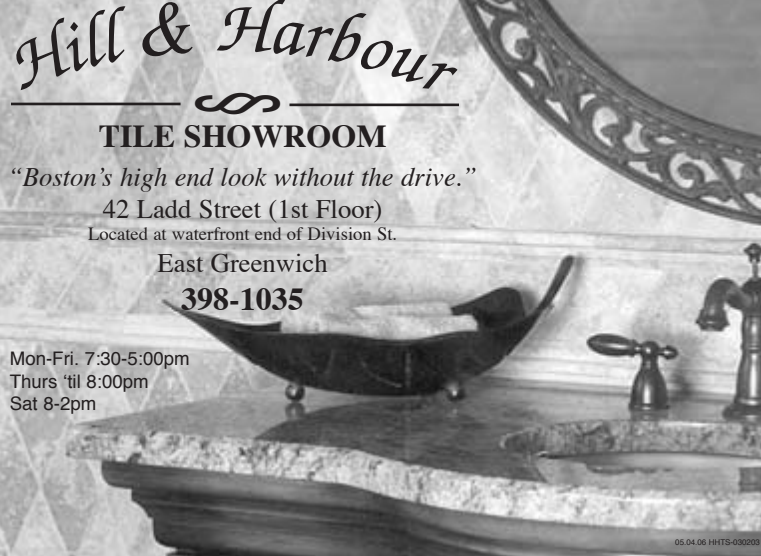
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