

When my cousin Merrie's Christmas letter came this year, it was in the format of a little newspaper--three or four columns with a masthead like one might see on a regular newspaper. There were pictures and articles about the past year that concerned their family. I told her she should make this format a regular feature of her yearly greetings. I was also just a bit jealous.

I have always liked anything to do with writing--books, newspapers, magazines and the physical properties that make them up. I am no shopper, but I like office supply stores for their shelves and aisles of various papers, notebooks, pencils, pens, envelopes, and everything that goes along with them.

When I was a young girl, probably somewhere between eight and ten years old, I sometimes produced a family newspaper. It was written in pencil in careful printing--three columns on an ordinary sheet of paper, lined notebook paper or, if we had any in the house, plain white paper. I don't recall what name I gave the paper, probably something along the line of the Bristol Budget or the Coe Creek News. I filled both sides of the paper with small articles and unartistic drawings. Probably, some of the pieces dealt with Old Roanie's latest calf, Dad's luck fishing for trout in the creek, and certainly, the antics of one of the house cats. I can't imagine that it was very interesting, but I'd give a lot to have a copy now.

Part of the lure of writing the paper was the setting. In the house where we grew up, we had a large old rolltop desk. That became, on those occasions when I was "publishing," the newspaper office. Rolling the top up and down sounded "professional" to me, and I found that I really needed to open and close the top frequently. The little pigeonholes were handy, too, for storing pencils, small paper notes, and so forth. But, the best features of the desk, as far as I was concerned, were the little pullout writing surfaces, one on each side. They were so handy, and I used them regularly.

Writing instruments--but, particularly, pencils--still lure me. I am probably one of the few people who are actually thrilled when old-

fashioned pencils with erasers are one of the gifts at the local bank at Christmas time. And, I even buy pencils.

When I started school, I discovered a wonderful invention--the hand cranked pencil sharpener. At home we had only the little kind that is operated by inserting the pencil and turning it, sharpening it against the little blade. The shavings fell wherever the sharpener was used. Usually, though, Dad made nice, sharp points on my pencils with his jackknife. At school, I learned the pleasure of emptying the pencil sharpener, a job given well behaved children along with pounding the chalk dust from the felt blackboard erasers. Now, we have one of those hand cranked pencil sharpeners at home, and I would never trade it for one of the battery operated versions that are more common these days.

The aim, of course, of all these tools and supplies is to make writing faster and less cumbersome. Printing on a piece of birch bark with a chunk of charcoal, or chiseling words in a piece of granite wouldn't be very easy, and I am sure that my weekly newsletters would be--if there were a way for someone to read them--very, very short.

So, the methods we have developed for conveying ideas from one person to another are interesting, too. We can write on a variety of surfaces, use any number of tools to make our marks, and employ all kinds of devices. But, the most fascinating thing about writing, as far as I am concerned, is that we can actually express our ideas via these little marks we make on paper or in some other way. When I sign my name with the various squiggles that make up the cursive letters, it still amazes me that someone I know who sees these marks can have a mental picture of me. I don't look anything like those doodles.

Words and the combinations we use--in conversation, in writing, in reading books--are endlessly enthralling. When Descartes wrote in the seventeenth century that "I think, therefore I am," I believe he could as well have written "I use words, therefore, I am."