

## 'Star Wars' exhibit comes to Science Museum, but is it science?

By SHARON SCHMICKLE

There is no question that Twin Cities crowds welcome the chance to rub up to Luke Skywalker's landspeeder, Princess Leia's iconic white dress and R2-D2 with his droid friends.

The exhibit where they will get that chance, "Star Wars: Where Science Meets Imagination," doesn't open at the Science Museum in St. Paul until June 13. But 12,556 people registered in advance — many of them last year — for priority-line tickets that went on sale in April.

And they are just the first wave. Regular individual ticket sales started Wednesday, and 7,747 were gone by Thursday afternoon. By comparison, it took three weeks to sell 6,430 tickets for the immensely popular Body Worlds exhibit.

Who could be surprised by the rush for tickets? Two generations have lined up at theater box offices for travel in fantasy to the far, far away galaxy where George Lucas staged his epic space operas.

But will the empire truly strike a victory for science education? Or is the exhibit, like the film series, more enchanting entertainment than real science?

It's both, said Mike Day, the senior vice president for museum enterprises.

"If it wasn't science, it wouldn't be at this institution," Day said. "It wouldn't meet our mandate, wouldn't meet our mission, wouldn't meet our strategic goals."

The museum does sobering exhibits. This year it ran "Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race," which explored the history of Nazi eugenic programs during the Third Reich.

At the same time, a centerpiece of the museum's strategy for 25 years has been to connect entertainment to education in a way that maximizes both.

Day prefers to call the entertainment component "engagement." It is one of the core footings of education, he said.

"You have to make it engaging in order to attract people to science," he said. "That's not the same as dumbing it down."

### Intrinsic wonder lost?

But some critics of modern culture say the reach for entertainment and celebrity has gone too far in education and many other aspects of American life. One such critic is Susan Jacoby, author of the New

York Times best seller "The Age of American Unreason."

"The idea — through the commercial tie-in and the connection with brand name recognition — is to disguise the fact that it is boring old science they are purveying," Jacoby said in a telephone interview. "The problem is that science is not boring. ... Science is one of the easiest things in the world to get kids interested in because real science is fascinating in and of itself."

To be sure, a pop culture hit as captivating as "Star Wars" is a powerful draw. And, used well, it can be an effective teaching tool.

The risk, she said, is that the intrinsic wonder of science in and of itself will be sidelined.

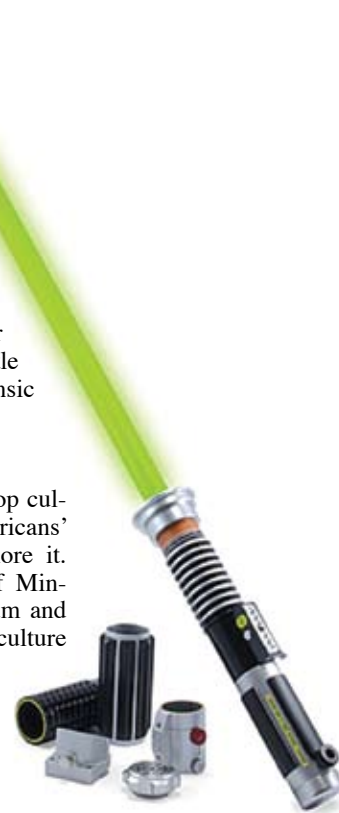
"The fact that museums feel they have to do this, have to tie things that are interesting in themselves into a celebrity or commercial push shows how little faith we have in the ability of intrinsic knowledge to fascinate," she said.

### Not Shakespeare

But Thom Swiss argues that pop culture has become so central to Americans' identities that teachers can't ignore it. A professor in the University of Minnesota's Department of Curriculum and Instruction, he specializes in pop culture and the classroom.

Schools are expected to teach Shakespeare. And certainly "Star Wars" is not Shakespeare.

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## MINNPOST.WORLD

# The blame game: Why the big numbers at the pump?

By STEVE BERG

The day of the \$100 fill-up is upon us. Stopping at the corner gas station to replenish your Chevy Suburban's 30-plus gallon tank could easily set you back \$115. That's an astonishing sum for Americans accustomed to driving everywhere for everything at prices that are uncommonly cheap by world standards.

But get used to big numbers at the pump. The price of crude oil for July delivery broke the \$135-per-barrel barrier on the New York Mercantile Exchange on Wednesday before closing slightly lower on Thursday at just below \$131. Record high crude prices led, in turn, to an average per-gallon price of \$3.81 at the pump and predictions that gasoline would surge over \$4 as the summer travel season begins.

Oil futures prices have more than doubled in the past year, accelerating recently as projected inventories declined, and traders bought additional oil to cover previous wrong-way bets. "It is not a growing market," Olivier Jakob, managing director of Petromatrix GmbH, told Bloomberg.com. "It is also facilitating the move upward [in price]."

Some traders expect crude prices to exceed \$200 this year, driven not only by increased global demand and dwindling supply, but by investors who believe – no pun intended – that the petroleum industry has the world over a barrel.

China and India are demanding vastly more oil while the U.S. seems unable to modify its auto-driven lifestyle, at least in the short run. "The only realistic option that we have, and there is none other, is to use biofuels," Vinod Khosla, the co-founder of Sun Microsystems Inc., told Bloomberg.

Absent speculators, the price of crude should be somewhere

between \$35 and \$90 per barrel, oil executives told Congress on Wednesday. But Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., said at a Judiciary Committee grilling of oil executives: "People don't get it. Demand is not crazy. Why are prices going crazy?"

The question prompts finger-pointing on all sides. Oil executives blame financial bettors. Financial bettors blame supply and demand. Some members of Congress blame oil companies for gouging and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries for bottling up production. OPEC blames speculators, wasteful U.S. consumers, and an aimless U.S. energy policy. Everyone blames China's growing fuel appetite.

The consequences have battered the U.S. economy for months, with these new developments on Thursday:

Ford Motor Co., after recording a \$100 million first-quarter profit, announced that it no longer expects full-year profitability in 2009. It also announced further plans to curb U.S. production, blaming high oil and steel prices.

American Airlines blamed fuel prices as it began to absorb complaints about a new policy: charging a fee of \$15 for each customer's first checked bag. A wave of criticism began as the quality of air travel continued to decline.

"Everyone is going to try to beat the system," said industry analyst Henry Hartevelde. "When you check your bags for free on Greyhound, but not on an airline, it's a sad comment of the state of the whole industry." American will lean heavily on federal screeners to check carry-on items, now expected to multiply and cause more crowding in security lines and in the aisles of aircraft.

"Before you get too upset," wrote Wall Street Journal columnist Scott McCartney, "know



REUTERS

this: Oil prices are just killing airlines ... They are paying billions, yes billions, of added dollars in higher fuel prices."

## A finite resource

Amid all the accusations about who's to blame for high oil prices (some Minnesotans will even blame higher gasoline taxes), comes the undeniable truth that petroleum is a finite resource that will be increasingly difficult to cheaply extract.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the world's top energy monitoring agency is preparing a sharp downward revision of its oil supply forecast.

The shift, said the paper, "reflects deepening pessimism over whether oil companies can keep abreast of booming demand."

The Paris-based International Energy Agency's inventory of 400 top oil fields won't be completed until November. But, said the Journal, "the bottom line is already clear: Future crude supplies could be far tighter than previously thought."

## How to cope?

Americans can't change their lifestyles in an instant, but that's probably the inevitable solution. "The idea that global oil produc-

tion will soon peak is rapidly moving from fringe belief to mainstream assumption," Paul Krugman wrote this week in the New York Times. Old Europe sets a good example, he said, finding a way to prosper with gasoline prices exceeding \$8 a gallon. Germans, for example, own smaller cars and drive considerably less. They shop locally and use public transit more often. And they live in pleasant but compact neighborhoods of a kind that barely exist in America.

"Berlin is a city of trains, buses and bikes, while Atlanta (about the same size) is a city of cars, cars and cars," Krugman wrote. "Americans," he concluded, "will face increasingly strong incentives to start living like Europeans – maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of our lives."

*Steve Berg, a former Washington, D.C., bureau reporter, national correspondent and editorial writer for the Star Tribune, reports on urban design, transportation and national politics. He can be reached at sberg@minnpost.com.*

## Heard any good sermons lately?



**STEVE SCOTT**

The old saying about preachers is that they work only one hour a week. That's the one hour preaching on Sunday morning.

That leaves the other 167 hours for "free time," in which they get to visit the hospitalized and the shut-in, teach confirmation, administer the church finances, give the invocation at the Kiwanis Club luncheon, take the youth group to Valley-fair, work to end homelessness, war, crime and global warming, and fix the boiler in the church.

Pastors, however, will tell a different story. They'll say the demands of ministry — admittedly God-given and necessary — actually keep them from devoting energy to the most public task they perform: preaching.

Great preachers wield mighty influence by their preaching. Their hallmarks are a fervent heart and oratorical eloquence. Martin Luther King Jr. was a preacher first. The Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr. wasn't plastered (or skewered) on YouTube for something he said at a lecture,

but for what he preached. Many of the great social movements and revivals spread like wildfire only after being ignited in a pulpit.

So have any sermons sparked anything in you lately?

### Minneapolis hosting 'party of preaching'

This week in Minneapolis, 2,100 preachers — maybe including yours — from the United States and Canada are being preached to. They're gathered at two downtown churches as today's leading preachers light a fire in their souls. The Festival of Homiletics — loosely translated: "party of preaching"; who knew those two words went together? — brought in the experts to inspire, cajole and challenge those who toil in that task week in and week out.

They're not focusing on the one hour a week up in front of the congregation, but on the other 167 hours.

"From a sermon-writer's perspective, it's about the willingness to do the hard work this love and faith requires of them," said Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, teacher,

and preacher extraordinaire (judging by the acclamation of her colleagues).

In other words, there's no sermon to be preached without adequate preparation. (Sounds like advice you'd give your teenager: You have to study first before you take the test.)

The adage says pastors should spend one hour preparing for every minute in the pulpit. Do the math: that's 15 to 20 hours a week poring over biblical texts, praying, reading commentaries, writing, praying, editing, rewriting, praying, etc. Think of it as the R&D phase — research and development — of Ministry Inc.

"There's no substitute for this kind of time," Brown Taylor said. "That's because it works."

That's not to say many pastors don't wait for the muse to speak to them late on a Saturday night.

"If you set a time every day to work on and prepare the sermon, the muse will find you," Brown Taylor reassured. "Instead of flirting with her, make a date."

If you think your pastor is just skirting responsibility by ensconcing herself in a coffee shop to read and study, these experts would say think again. Rather, they urge preachers to take the time — and lots of it — to ground themselves in the basics: the Bible and Jesus. Who would have thought it?

If that sounds easy, listen to Anna Carter Florence speaking to the gathered flock this week: "As a preacher, you let the text speak to you first. You go into it so deeply that it kills you and then it raises you. That sounds a bit extreme ... but you live in it to the point of total surrender. ... Then, you show us what you see and what you believe. Show us where you see Jesus in this text."

The next time your pastor can't be found on a Wednesday afternoon, you might want to pray that they're off somewhere getting so deeply into the biblical story you can't help but be inspired when you hear them preach during that one hour they're actually "working."

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Joel Kramer, CEO and editor

# 'Star Wars' exhibit comes to Science Museum, but is it science?

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"But it matters to most people more than Shakespeare," Swiss said.

"Twenty years ago there used to be a difference between high culture and mass culture," Swiss said. "High culture is what learned people did, and the rest of us did mass culture. ... We are at a different spot now. There is a much closer relationship between the two."

The trick to using "Star Wars" for effective teaching, he said, is to use the famous films as a portal into subjects you can probe with depth and breadth.

"If you bring 'Star Wars' into the classroom and simply talk about the movie, that's the stupid way of doing it," he said.

## Lightsaber science

Indeed, students would come away seriously misinformed.

"Star Wars" portrays a lot of the trappings of science, but it's more of a fantasy story than science fiction, let alone real science, said James Kakalios, a physics professor at the University of Minnesota and author of the book "The Physics of Superheroes."

"They didn't worry quite as much about the science as you see in some other types of science fiction," Kakalios said. "At the end of the day, it's more of a classical story of sorcery. ... A 'Star Wars' story could be translated into a Middle Earth scenario: young hero on a noble quest confronts the dark father."

Take lightsabers.

(Personal note to Nicholas who is 8; Andrew, 6; and Elsa, 4: If you are reading this, stop here. I don't want to break your hearts.)

Lightsabers are sheer nonsense from a scientific perspective.

Light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles/second, Kakalios said. To have it jut out a few feet and then somehow become a rigid energy beam "doesn't physically make sense," he said.

"It's light acting in very non-light ways," he said.

But Kakalios is no meany. When he gives talks to kids about science and super heroes, he often is asked to explain lightsabers. His stock response: "As a wise man once said, 'Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid.' (a Han Solo line.)"

Lucas was right not to worry about whether it was physically realistic, Kakalios said.

"He was telling a story," Kakalios said. "This is the fantasy aspect of it, and it is a great aspect because it is so cool."

George Lucas visited the exhibit when

Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry displayed it last fall. He told the Chicago Tribune "'Star Wars' was designed to stimulate the imagination of young kids. It was to get kids to think and use their imagination and go home and draw pictures and make their own stories."

But does that make it a suitable portal for learning science, given the liberties Lucas took?

Kakalios thinks so. For all of the fascination with science, people often are intimidated by it, he said. Their fears can be eased by hitching the science to something they know and enjoy. It's one reason he draws superheroes into his talks.

"If you talk about Spider-man, people don't get those same shields up right away," he said. "They are more likely to remain engaged, more likely to ask questions."

In fact, "Star Wars" has been so engaging that it drew many young people to careers in science.

"There are a fair number of people working in artificial intelligence labs and robotics labs who were inspired as kids because of 'Star Wars,'" Kakalios said.

## Droids and levitation

The exhibits coming to the Science Museum "turn on the science," by focusing on robotics and transportation, Day said.

One feature is a Robot Theater where visitors enter a Jawa sandcrawler, meet the robot C-3PO, and listen as he debates the merits of his pal R2-D2 with a real-life expert.

In the "Star Wars" universe, robots are droids. That is Lucas' adaptation of the word "android," which dictionaries define as an artificially created being that usually takes a human form.

Museum-goers will learn that a robot is a programmable machine that can imitate something humans do — say, install a vehicle part in a Detroit assembly line — without necessarily looking or talking like humans. The exhibits will offer visitors chances to learn about the sensors, motors, computers, power supplies and mechanical structures that make up a useful, working robot. They also can test their lab skills by trying to create and program a robot.

"As it says in the subtitle of the exhibit, it's where science meets imagination that questions are raised," Day said. "Could this be real? Could we have robots like C-3PO

and R2-D2?"

For the transportation component, the exhibit will feature Luke Skywalker's land-speeder from Episode IV and several other models, including a Naboo starfighter, Darth Vader's Star Destroyer Devastator and Queen Amidala's Nubian Royal Starship.

Visitors also will get a chance to climb aboard a real-world hovercraft and experience levitation. There will be engineering stations where people can try building a hovercraft and manipulating the magnetic force needed to move it on a bed of air.

The exhibit was created at the Museum of Science in Boston with support from Lucasfilm Ltd and other museums in an eight-member collaborative which includes Minnesota.

Minnesota is the last member of the collaborative to show it. And waiting at the end of the line is a good thing, Day said, because each of the other seven museums enhanced the exhibit along the way.

After the exhibit leaves St. Paul Aug. 24, it will tour overseas.

Until then, the Force can be with you.

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# The Daily Glean: 500K keeps the Coens from Green Bay

By DAVID BRAUER

The locals go cuckoo that the Coen brothers will film their next movie here. A \$500,000 state grant did the trick, and we got a hometown discount over Wisconsin's more generous rebate, the Strib's Colin Covert reports. Theoretically, the film will generate \$6 million or so in economic activity. "A Serious Man" begins shooting Sept. 8. This is an excuse to recall the U economics class I took from the Oscar winners' dad. Good prof, but what I remember most is he swore like a sailor.

The Strib's David Phelps says UnitedHealth CEO Stephen Helmsley and backdated stock options might've been tighter than previously believed. Company-sponsored investigations cleared Helmsley, who replaced the king of backdating, Bill McGuire. However, shareholders led by the California pension fund CALPERS allege Helmsley "personally offered backdated options to all new hires [and] approved mass grants."

WCCO's Esme Murphy reports that slumping car sales mean \$15 million less for local mass transit. That's because 21 percent of the sales tax on car purchases goes to buses and trains. The sales-tax drop and higher gas prices make a fall fare increase inevitable; the issue will be decided next month. Mass transit's sales-tax share escalates to 36 percent in 2012.

Ground-level foreclosure tale from KSTP and the Strib. City officials emptied an eight-unit complex in the middle of the day; on TV, the pain and confusion is evident; one mom complains that her daughter arrived back from school to no home. However, the city gave residents final notice three weeks ago, and half the units lacked copper piping. Neighbors say

it's a good move against a drug-infested hotspot where the rental license had been revoked.

Finance & Commerce offers a good look at the property tax cap's effect on metro counties. Anoka County plans an "all but certain" tax-hike referendum (that's uncapped); Hennepin County foresees human-service cuts (atop reduced state hospital reimbursements) and cash-strapped Ramsey County is carefully examining the cap's exemptions.

Lawyers helping lawyers: MPR's Tom Scheck notes that attorneys for 35W victims received fresh ammunition from Wednesday's legislative-commission report. (For what I hope is the last time: authored by my wife's law firm, but not my wife.) The report featured rare testimony from MnDOT consultant URS, and trial lawyer Jim Schwebel says they've become a fatter target. For you legal geeks: URS was represented by Dorsey & Whitney during the investigation.

MPR's Tom Robertson reports that 60 percent of north-west Minnesota nursing homes are in danger of closing. State-wide, a third are threatened. The average nursing home loses \$25 per patient per day due to government reimbursement rates. This year's modest legislative increase isn't enough to stem the problem, advocates say. Beds are down, and so is demand, but boomers might change that.

Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman is oh-for-three trying to convict suspected shooters of North Minneapolis teen bystanders, but now hopes the fourth time's a charm. The Strib's Terry Collins and Rochelle Olson say Freeman will try a second man in the case of Vernice Hall, who suffered massive brain damage in a 2007

incident. The first defendant was exonerated this week; even the victim's dad admitted the evidence wasn't convincing. Freeman also struck out twice in the Charez Jones killing.

It's a holiday-weekend Friday, so I recommend you take a moment and enjoy PiPresser Richard Chin's tour through Chicago's All-Candy Expo. Who'd you sweet-talk to get that assignment, Richard?

KARE's Karla Hult has a nice human-interest feature on Karen Nyberg, who next week will become the 50th woman in space. The robot-arm operator is from Vining, Minn., a town of 68 people. Probably a space-going first: her dad's a sculptor. The report is worth watching just for the town's sculpture garden.

Speaking of: MPR's Marianne Combs offers a look at an unusual Walker Sculpture Garden design show. It features creative, affordable tools that help the Third World. Clever water filters, bamboo pumps — it's a great mix of art and practicality.

I don't get to Northeast Minneapolis as much as I'd like, so I've never heard of a family restaurant called, effervescently, Pop! The PiPress's Nancy Ngo says the all-ages eatery could fill the Fhima's space in downtown St. Paul. Not quite the class joint that local swells originally envisioned, but it might have a better chance of success.

The PiPress's must-read "Opinuedo" column says felt-tipped portrait vandals should smell Jesse Ventura's hot breath; mocks Gov. Pawlenty's not-very-feigned veepstakes interest; and says tax rankings mean bad news for tax haters: "We're not tip-top any more ... please adjust your rhetoric accordingly."

WCCO's Darcy Pohland pours cold water on Minneapolis's \$180,000 plan to market city agua. The killshot: Pohland notes the city spends just \$11,600 to fix potholes. Mayor R.T. Rybak says the cash can't be spent on tar; it's limited to water purposes.

An ex-Minneapolis councilmember goes to court to get President Bush arrested come GOP convention time. Politely, the Strib's Rochelle Olson calls it a "long shot." Ed Felien wants Bush prosecuted for murder in the Iraq War, conspiracy to fix oil prices and opium distribution in Afghanistan. Prosecutors, taking it seriously, say a judge shouldn't be allowed to order them to investigate anyone. No ruling date is set.

Barry Casselman, who lives near the 35W collapse, celebrates "Minneapolis' Bridge to Somewhere" in the Washington Times. Local pols get plenty of praise.

The PiPress's John Welbes says beginning next Wednesday, you can use your cellphone as a Northwest boarding pass. Just not here, yet; Indianapolis is the test market. Thanks to cumbersome local procedures, we don't get our turn until year's end. The familiar bar code is sent to your handheld device, which you can wave over the scanner. It won't take the sting out of high fares, but it is truly paperless!

Nort spews: The Twins slip back under .500 with an 8-7 extra-inning loss to Texas. To quote the Internet: meh.

## COMMUNITY VOICES

## Reader Roundup: End of session, name changes (or not) attract comments

**Analyses of the legislative session and married women keeping their birth names were among recent MinnPost topics drawing reader comments. Here is a sampling:**

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*Robert Whereatt's May 19 story, "If you are ... a tunnel rat or a Hannah Montana fan, this legislative session will interest you," spurred these comments:*

*John Olson said:*

If you are a Minnesotan: You can be thankful that the rascals have gone home for another year! :-)

*And Mike Keliher said:*

Isn't the window-tint restriction only applicable to the front-door windows? I always thought back windows and the rear windshield were exempt.

•••••

Steve Berg's May 22 analysis, "How well did the Legislature prepare Minnesotans to deal with big global challenges?" drew several responses, including these:

*Grace Kelly said:*

Your heading again shows bias: How well did the LEGISLATURE prepare Minnesotans to deal with big global challenges?

How about this heading? How well did the GOVERNOR prepare Minnesotans to deal with big global challenges?

Or does the governor not have veto power and the willingness to go into extra sessions if he does not get what he wants?

So why are you giving the governor a free pass yet again?

*Bob Spaulding added:*

Thank you Steve for a terrific, accurate, and comprehensive analysis of climate change and the legislature.

This issue is different than almost all others — it cuts to our future, and across party lines. When it comes right down to it, legislators need to hear from us [that] climate change is as or more important than most of the other traditional considerations that the legislature is faced with.

The climate doesn't care that auto dealers bought power and influence among legislators in 2008, stopping passage of emissions standards. The climate doesn't care that the building trades were vociferous in their support of the Mall of America expansion in 2008, which even without a ramp will have clear climate impacts.

On this one issue — climate change — an issue which has profound implications for my generation, all legislators need to focus intently on one urgent goal: slowing climate change. Pawlenty certainly has room for improvement — and starting to implement the recommendations of his own study group might be a good start.

But the DFL has plenty of room for improvement as well. For example, the California auto emissions standards came to the Senate Business, Industry and

Jobs Committee, on which 11 of the 17 members are DFLers. However, the emissions standards — which have passed 13 states — failed to garner more than a 7-10 vote, even with DFLers occupying 11 of the 17 slots.

As Erkel notes, the time for action was yesterday, and legislators of all stripes need to hear that message loud and clear, again and again.

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*Nina Petersen-Perlman wrote in response to "What if 'Hillary Rodham' had been on the ballot? (And what's become of the keep-your-own-name trend?)," by Casey Selix, May 21:*

I'm the feminist daughter of a feminist who made the decision to hyphenate when she married my father. He remains Jim Perlman, but my mother, my three siblings and I all have the last name Petersen-Perlman. My 16-character last name has posed all sorts of problems in my life — I often have to drop the Petersen to make my work email address spell-able over the phone — but it's also part of my identity. The question is: what are my siblings and I supposed to do when we get married? We can't very well compromise as my mother did and add a third name to the mix. And I don't want to curse my children with a hyphenated name, so I won't be able to share my name with my progeny. I'm pretty much stuck with either taking the mister's name or being the lone PP of my clan. Le sigh.

*John Olson said:*

Personally, I do not think it a big deal with respect to Sen. Clinton. Given that she is married to a former President, if she chose to change back to "Rodham," it would make them no different than any of a gazillion Hollywood couples.

Back in the 80's we also had the episode of then-Governor Perpich insisting that he be referred to as "Rudolph" instead of "Rudy." At the end of it all, he was still the same person and his opponents still referred to him as "Governor Goofy."

*And Grace McGarvie commented:*

I am not using names to protect the guilty, but — I have 5 sisters, all of whom married and changed their names to their husband's name. I did too, with my first husband. After the divorce I decided to pick a new name, rather than retain my ex's name. I picked my mother's maiden name, because I liked the sound of it with my first name. My maiden name, which I had not had for almost 29 years, was almost like a new name in my brain, and was also difficult for people to pronounce. It was not rejection in my mind, but embracing a different family name — matriarchally.

My brother found a case of antique jars that had my maiden name on it. He gave each one of my married sisters one jar, and told each of them he was not giving me one, because I must not like my maiden name.

What did I do? Went to an antique shop and bought my own!!!!

## Want to add your voice?

If you're interested in joining the discussion by writing a Community Voices article, email Susan Albright at [salbright@minnpost.com](mailto:salbright@minnpost.com).