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## CHARACTERS IN OUR COMMUNITY: LOCALS GIVE AREA ITS COLOR

*DAWN HINSHAW, Staff Writer*

Cities are made up of interesting characters.

People who pop up from time to time, who stand out in a crowd, who give the community a feeling of familiarity. So we decided to compile a list of "20 People You Should Know If You Live in Columbia."

Some time or another, you're bound to run across these folks.

They help make Columbia home.

### ROBERT ARIAIL

It's possible to flip through a newspaper in Europe or Japan and see an editorial cartoon by Columbia's own Robert Ariail. Ariail, twice a finalist for The Pulitzer, has been on The State's editorial page since 1984. Some of his cartoons are sight gags, others play on words. Some comment on world events, while others focus on local doings. As for the art itself - well, three months into George Bush's term, Ariail couldn't help but miss the pudgy president, who was easier to capture in black ink. "It always takes you a little while to get used to the new face," he said.

### PAUL DEFINIS

Paul DeFinis devotes all his free time to decorating a drab streetcorner. His unconventional lawn ornaments - fish tanks, clocks and thermometers, recycled toys - have given folk who're stuck in traffic a reason to smile for the past five years or more.

But his unique brand of sunshine slipped behind a cloud for a while. The Forest Acres City Council decided his doo-dads were a distraction to drivers, and he gave up his first corner. His fans objected and DeFinis, a hairstylist with a handlebar mustache, was offered a new corner: Browder's Texaco, at Forest Drive and Trenholm Road. Love it or hate it, DeFinis' display has risen to the status of a local landmark, bringing a splash of personality to a concrete corner.

### JOHNNY GARDNER

For the past decade or so, Johnny Gardner has carried on a one-man, near constant protest against abortion. He may carry a sign or a doll out front of the State House but the main way

he gets attention is with his voice. He shouts his beliefs. In a letter to the editor back in 1994, Gardner said: "I'm willing for people to think I'm a nut as long as it benefits our unborn children."

#### DICK HARPOOTLIAN

Dick Harpootlian has a one-liner for just about any situation. Whether the topic is politics, personalities or the law, this Democratic insider has something acerbic to say. Over the years, he has been both a hard-nosed prosecutor and successful defense lawyer, even holding public office twice. Of his experience in county government, Harpootlian once said: "Being on County Council was like four years of the dry heaves."

#### TOLLY HONEYCUTT

She doesn't own a car. She considers her 10-pound backpack her equivalent of a back seat, where she stows everything she might need in a day. Her name is Tolly Honeycutt, and she walks everywhere, landing at USC at some point each day.

A college student for more than 30 years, she has studied languages, archaeology, mythology, calculus and theology. Honeycutt doesn't accept rides, even from acquaintances. She walks about 40 miles in an average week. "When you walk, you're invigorated," she said in a 1997 interview. "The world sort of flows by, and you see the clouds and the sky. Waiting for the bus is the opposite. . . . You're looking at your watch."

#### DANIELLE HOWLE

A singer, a songwriter, a guitarist and free spirit - that's Danielle Howle. Since the mid-1980s, folk who follow music in Columbia have enjoyed her powerful voice and heart-on-the-sleeve delivery, with bands the Blue Laws, then Lay Quiet Awhile and now the Tantrums.

She has a simple presence and Southern style that serve her well on tour. "I think people are the same all over," she once said. "If you show them your heart, they're either going to turn it down or say, 'Hey, man, that's pretty cool.' I think everybody's got a lot in common, a lot more than they realize."

For the past several months, Howle has been working on a film, due out in 2002, about her musical life.

#### ERNEST LEE

In a town obsessed with gamecocks, Ernest Lee has made a living out of painting funky chickens. Lee has a studio on wheels, a trailer done up like a barn that reads SEE ROCK CITY on the roof. You'll see him, dressed in a tuxedo and parked in empty lots with his paintings set out for sale. Sometimes, he's at Gervais and Harden streets; other times, on Huger Street.

#### RUDY MANCKE

As a boy, Rudy Mancke had an interest in anatomy (he used to open up animals that lay dead on the roadside) so, naturally, his parents encouraged him to become a surgeon. But it wasn't until a geology professor uttered the word "naturalist" that the light went on.

Now, Mancke is South Carolina's John Muir, helping other people see the world a little more completely. He leads walks in the woods, through fields or along beaches, describing what he sees for a TV camera. His show, "NatureScene," airs at 7:30 p.m. Saturdays on S.C. ETV. It's seen around the country and in Canada, too. "It's a reminder, as we go along, that man is a part of nature, not separate from it, and there are a lot of interesting plants and animals out there, and maybe they're worth taking care of," he said.

Mancke is a generalist, which is a little unusual these days. He knows about plants, animals, fossils, rocks and minerals. His interests constantly shift; lately, he's been captivated by dragonflies.

#### FRED MCCURDY

Local media have reported sightings of Santa Claus in Columbia just about every Christmas since 1982. Santa shows up at Woodhill Mall to have his photo taken with long lines of children and pets, and also serves as grand marshal of Christmas parades in Columbia and Lexington.

Wonder why some guy would go to all the trouble? Because Christmas is for children.

Once, we asked Fred McCurdy if any children stuck in his memory over the years.

"There was this lonely little girl," he said. "She was a sweet little thing, but she had a frown on her face. She was almost crying. I kept asking her what was wrong, but she wouldn't say anything. I asked her what she wanted for Christmas, but she didn't talk too much.

"As she was leaving, I asked if there was anything she wanted me to do for her. She said, 'There is one thing you can help me do, Santa Claus. When you're flying high in the sky on Christmas Eve, if you see my granddaddy, tell him hi for me, and that I love him. He died last week, and I didn't get home in time to tell him.'

"I got kind of choked up. And I told her, 'I don't think I have to tell your granddaddy anything. He knows you love him. But I'll look for him, and I'll tell him.' "

#### JOE PINNER

After 38 years on the air, everybody's favorite weatherman has recently gone into semi-retirement. But while Joe Pinner has given up his Saturday morning TV character, Mr. Knozit, who'd appeared on WIS since 1963, Pinner remains a colorful local character. He's nothing if not enthusiastic. He never turns down an opportunity to emcee a beauty pageant, host a holiday event - or generally serve as the warm-hearted center of attention.

#### MARIE-LOUISE RAMSDALE

At 23, this woman set her sights on starting a youth service program called City Year in Columbia - and did it, making this the first expansion site outside Boston. (Now, City Year has spread to a half-dozen other cities, as well.)

Then Ramsdale, a graduate of the Harvard law school, joined one of the city's most prestigious law firms. It didn't last. She recognized that she needed a mission and, at 30, found it in First Steps, the governor's initiative on preschoolers. Her name is pronounced "Mary-Louise," but

friends refer to her in shorthand, "M-L," reflecting the speed with which she seems to move through any given day.

#### DOT RYALL

Have lunch with Dot Ryall, they say, "and it'll cost you." That's because Ryall, executive director of the Cultural Council of Richland and Lexington Counties since 1989, is always scouting around for money. Her organization commissions public art and doles out nearly \$1 million in corporate gifts each year to local museums, musicians and dancers. As for the well-connected Ryall, she's liable to turn up anyplace - parties, art openings, government meetings - as she presses the flesh for the arts.

#### 'BERT' SEABORN

She runs the best little soul-food restaurant in town, offering a meat and three with simplicity.

Bert's College Grill has been open for 30 years at Harden and Taylor streets, one of the few places in town with oxtails and chitterlings on the menu.

"This might be a rundown little old building," said Bert (short for Roberta) Seaborn, "but we have all kinds of famous people come in here" - Queen Latifah, Patti LaBelle, Luther Vandross, The Temptations. In an appearance a couple of years ago, the poet Nikki Giovanni waxed eloquently about the sweet tea at Bert's.

"They love the fresh vegetables we cook. . . . Especially the yams," said Seaborn, who shops, cooks and greets customers.

Sometime in the coming year, Seaborn said Benedict College is going to redevelop the corner. But she promises she'll be building back.

#### JAY SHREVE

He was a pioneer in the redevelopment of West Columbia's State Street. Now, Jay Shreve, 31-year-old coffee connoisseur, is putting all his beans in one basket.

He's sold his first restaurant, the Courtyard Coffeehouse, while concentrating his energies on Cool Beans near the USC campus, pursuing a masters degree in international business and learning Spanish. Looking ahead, Shreve said he has reserved space for an indoor/outdoor restaurant along the Columbia canal, convinced that the riverfront will be the place to be in a couple of years.

#### BLUE SKY

This Columbia artist has a traditional gallery - one located in a Five Points storefront - but his best-known art isn't there. It's out on the streets, free for the gawking. Three pieces of Blue Sky's work are located off Taylor and Marion streets in downtown Columbia. There's the "Busted Plug Plaza" (2001), a giant silver fire hydrant spewing water; "Light at the End of the Tunnel" (2000); and "Tunnelvision" (1975). It was "Tunnelvision," with its perpetual sunset, that established Blue Sky as a bona fide local phenomenon.

## DRINK SMALL

Drink Small is a genuine entertainer, a blues musician who knows how to play for an audience, not just at 'em. His country roots and gospel training - he grew up in Bishopville and left his hometown as the guitarist for the Spiritualaires - still show up in his music today. He started playing the college circuit along about 1960. "I came up doing it all," he told an interviewer for the S.C. Arts Commission, which has named him a S.C. treasure. "That's why my blues is a little different, 'cause I got a little church in it. And I got a lot of blues in it."

## JACK SWERLING

Now here's the guy you want on your side if you're ever in trouble. **Jack Swerling** is a tough defense lawyer who still manages to be one of the most likable fellows around. He's 6-foot-5, has a New York accent, liberal leanings and a commanding knowledge of criminal law - so much so that he's been teaching brush-up classes for lawyers and judges for the past 20 years. **Swerling**, who reporters nicknamed "Mr. Murder," has represented politicians and murderers, including the notorious Pee Wee Gaskins and Larry Gene Bell.

## JEAN TOAL

She's the most powerful woman in South Carolina given the gavel she holds as chief justice of the state Supreme Court. Jean Toal has always been a trailblazer, one who preaches that a woman shouldn't pull the ladder up behind her, but should extend a hand to the next woman coming along. She's a distinctive blend of toughness and compassion.

For 12 years, Toal was a state legislator who earned respect in a setting where women rarely lead the floor fights on big issues. In 1988, she came from behind to become the first and only woman appointed to the Supreme Court. Last year, she moved up to chief justice, saying, "Belief in yourself really can define your opportunities."

## WAYNE WICKERS

Weekdays, when the weather's nice, Wayne Wickers pushes his cart to the curb and serves up a lunch of homemade hot dogs, chili and slaw. Wickers is a former New York City cop and firefighter - the accent is a dead give-away - who started peddling dogs "that snap" 10 years ago. Now, wearing a beard and chef's hat, and shaded by a sidewalk umbrella, Wickers and his sidekick, wife Geri, have become fixtures at the corner of Assembly and Hampton streets downtown.

## DAVID WILLIAMS

Nobody sings the song "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" like David Williams. A loyal Bombers fan, Williams wears a red and white uniform (No. 00) and big smile to every home game.

"I've been going to the games all my life," he once told a reporter. "I love to cheer the teams on so they can win." He's been rooting on the home team, win or lose, for 18 years now.

1. Robert Ariail (drawing)
2. Paul Definis