

Today's weather picture by: Monique Bunton, 8, Vancouver, Mill Plain Elementary School



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2004

## A DAY IN THE LIFE



DAVE BARRY

### A very fetching friend, indeed

I'm trying to convince my wife that we need a dog. I grew up with dogs, and am comfortable with their ways. If we're visiting someone's home, and I suddenly experience a sensation of humid warmth, and I look down and see that my right arm has disappeared up to the elbow inside the mouth of a dog the size of a medium horse, I am not alarmed.

I know that this is simply how a large, friendly dog says: "Greetings! You have a pleasing salty taste!"

I respond by telling the dog that he is a GOOD BOY and pounding him with hearty blows, blows that would flatten a cat like a hairy pancake, but which only make the dog like me more. He likes me so much that he goes and gets his Special Toy.

This is something that used to be a recognizable object — a stuffed animal, a basketball, a Federal Express driver — but has long since been converted, through countless hours of hard work on the dog's part, into a random wad of filth held together by 73 gallons of congealed dog spit.

"GIVE ME THAT!" I shout, grabbing an end of the Special Toy. This pleases the dog: It confirms his belief that his Special Toy is the most desirable item in the universe, more desirable even than the corpse of a squirrel. For several seconds we fight for this prize, the dog whipping his head side to side like a crazed windshield wiper.

Finally I yank the Special Toy free and hold it triumphantly aloft. The dog watches it with laser-beam concentration, his entire body vibrating with excitement, waiting for me to throw it ... waiting ... waiting ... until finally I cock my arm, and, with a quick motion I ...

... fake a throw. I'm still holding the Special Toy. But WHOOSH the dog has launched himself across the room, an unguided pursuit missile, reaching a velocity of 75 mph before WHAM he slams headfirst into the wall at the far end of the room. This stimulates the M&M-sized clump of nerve cells that serves as a dog's brain to form a thought: The Special Toy is not here! WHERE IS THE SPECIAL TOY??

#### A special appeal

The dog whirls, sees the toy in my hand and races back across the room. Just as he reaches me, I cock my arm and ...

... fake another throw. WHOOSH! WHAM! The fake works again! It will always work. I can keep faking throws until the dog has punched a dog-shaped hole completely through the far wall, and the dog will STILL sprint back to me, sincerely believing that THIS time, I'm going to throw the toy. This is one reason why I love dogs.

My wife, who would not touch the Special Toy with a barge pole, is less impressed. She fails to see the appeal of an animal that appears to be less intelligent than its own parasites. Oh, I've tried to explain the advantages of having a dog. For example:

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Photos by DAVID PLECHL for the Columbian

Kevin "Baldy" Ritter says the challenge of barbering most of his clients, such as Scott Barnes of Camas, is to nip all of the stray hairs.

# Baldy the barber

Owner of Camas shop finds harmony in his existence

By BRETT OPPEGAARD  
Columbian staff writer

A pot of Folger's coffee brews as Kevin Ritter makes his usual Saturday morning rounds.

The 51-year-old plunks a couple of quarters into a newspaper box, grabs the reading material, then takes out the day's pack of Bronco menthols. Smoking a cigarette as sunrise gradually pours color over downtown Camas, he momentarily mirrors the billowing stacks of the Georgia-Pacific paper mill that tower over the otherwise two-story skyline on this end of Northeast Fourth Avenue.

A half-dozen cut fir trees, lavishly decorated for a contest, have been tipped over during the night, with smashed ornaments on the streets like fallen leaves. The swath of Christmas sneer starts at one tavern door and ends at another, leading Ritter to denounce the drunks who must have done it. Almost as bad as the kids who regularly put soap in the nearby fountain, he says a couple of times to no one in particular.

Nearly 8 a.m. now, and Ritter goes back into his barber shop. It's one of three such establishments clustered in this small district, shaped like the top of a T, at the main entrance to the mill. All three of these shops have been in the hair-cutting business for at least the

past 50 years, pre-dating each of the current operators. Ritter, celebrating his fifth anniversary at the site this month, guzzles a cup of black coffee. Pours another. He covers his bald head with a Santa hat, lights another cigarette and waits to see what the day will bring.

The sign outside of his door reads "Baldy's," so most people around here just call him by that name. Baldy's specialty: shaving heads, \$7 a scalp.

#### Wait, hurry, wait some more

More than an hour passes without anyone coming through the door, and Baldy begins to wonder if this is going to be another one of those days. It's been a slow week. He's earned just \$40 total, including tips, for the past four days. This is supposed to be his busiest time of the year, with the various holidays coming, and Saturdays generally are his busiest days. But he doesn't take appointments, meaning he never knows what to expect.

He started reading Mary Higgins Clark's "All Around Town" on Friday morning, for example, and by the end of the day he was already 160 pages into it. With nothing better to do, he picks the book up and starts where he left off.

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When customers aren't around, which is often, Baldy passes the day with coffee, cigarettes and books.



Baldy says he will read anything that he comes across, except Harlequin romances.

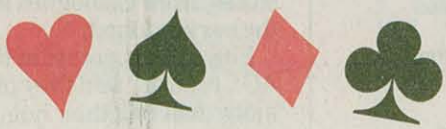


Most of Baldy's clients ask for shaves or crewcuts, including Jim Ogan of Camas.

#### Did you know?

- An average male has 100,000 hairs on his head, according to Men's Health Magazine.
- It is normal to lose 50 to 100 hairs from the head each day, according to [www.hairclub.com](http://www.hairclub.com). Baldness occurs if any of the various stages of replacement growth are disrupted.
- In the United States, no bald man has been elected chief executive since the first televised presidential debates.

#### your Guide:



It's a good bet poker items will be hot sellers this holiday season /D3



Travel: New coffee-table books are a traveler's next best thing to being there /D7

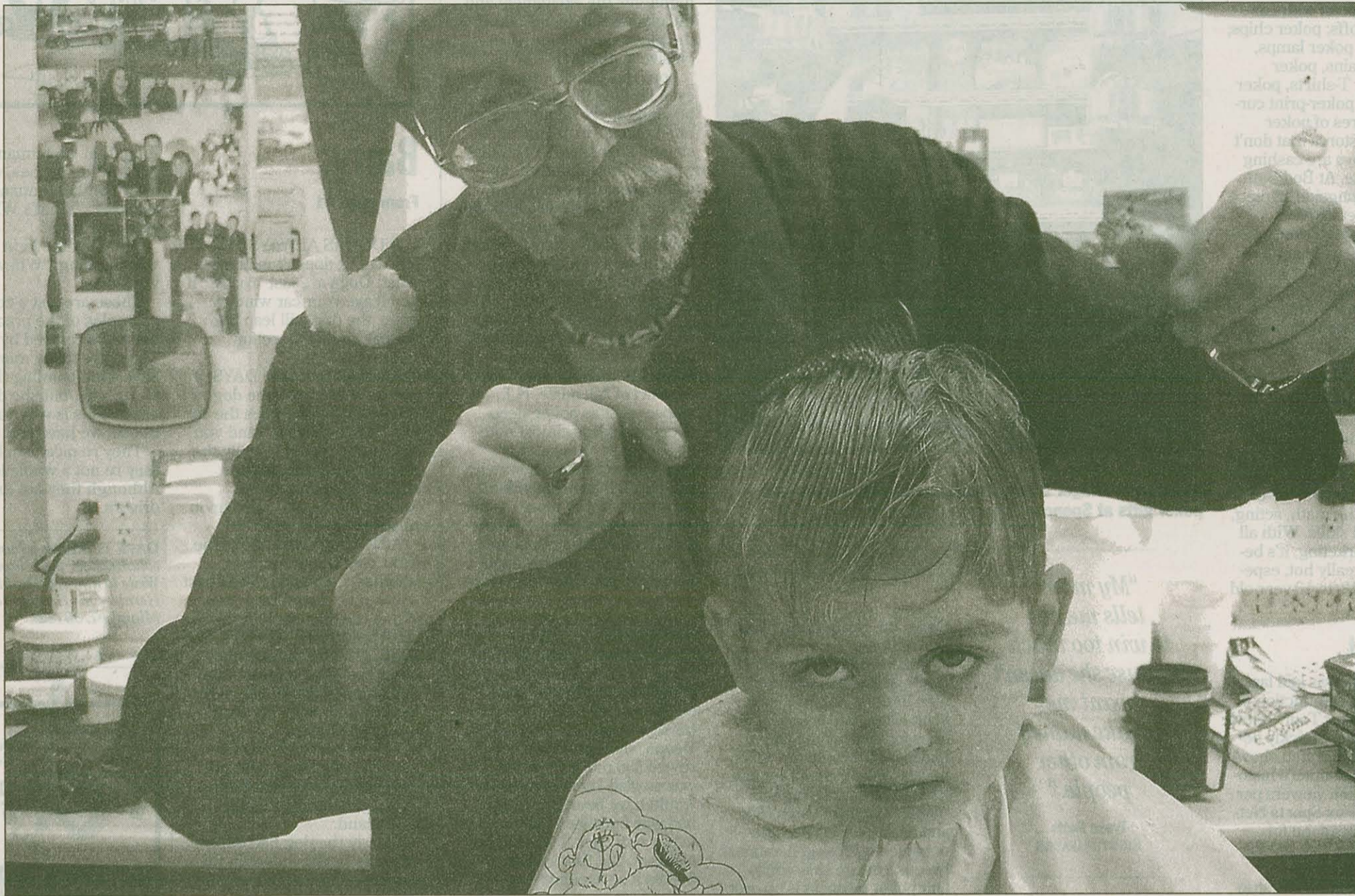
#### Coming Monday:

It's the 10th anniversary for Ilchee monument /D1

# Baldy the barber



Baldy is the latest barber to inhabit this Camas spot.



Photos by DAVID PLECHL for the Columbian

To keep children entertained during a haircut, Kevin "Baldy" Ritter suggests that they watch his shop bird, Blondie, and he promises to give each kid a sucker at the end.

## Baldy:

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"If I'm not cutting hair," he said, "I'm reading." Generally paperbacks. Anything but Harlequin romances. The books lying around were free, donated by customers and friends or checked out from the Camas library. The magazines just started coming in the mail at no cost, including FHM and Muscle & Fitness, so he puts them out.

Baldy didn't dream of being a barber. He thought he would spend his working career in paper mills. One major injury after another, though, sandwiching a DUI and a long stretch of unemployment, sent him back to school for midlife vocational training. Problems with his shoulder and back severely limited the options. So it was Vancouver School of Beauty for Baldy.

After finishing the eight-month process in 1998, Baldy started working in a shop in downtown Vancouver. He soon realized that his rent payments to the other barber were keeping the business afloat, so he decided to open his own place in Camas, selling his 1978 Fiero to pay for the counter, sinks and white paint for the walls. To get around now, he takes the bus.

He chose the name of the business, he said, by simply looking in the mirror. The sides of his head have short graying hair that connects with a trimmed beard. But he is clean-shaven on top.

"(Starting with a B) also put me No. 1 in the phone book," he said, even though he since has disconnected his phone to save money. He doesn't have a home or cellular telephone, either. "If someone wants to get a hold of me, I'm here during regular business hours Tuesdays through Fridays, open until 4 p.m. Saturdays."

His cash register is his jacket pocket. Change comes from a nearby restaurant. A space heater warms the place. The milestone of each day is when he cuts his fourth head of hair. That means the rent is paid. Everything else is profit. "I used to have cable (television in the shop)," he said. "But with that and the phone, I saved \$100 a month. ... That's a lot of \$7 haircuts."

The first customer on this Saturday is — no surprise — bald on top, Jim Ogan of Camas has been a regular for the past couple of years, and the barber quips to him as he works, "When you going to finish pulling them out?"

"There's a couple of wild ones up there, huh," Ogan replies.

"Two or three."

It takes Baldy less than 10 minutes to finish the job and part of that time is spent chatting. At the end, he remarks, "Good for another 30,000 miles, or until the next holiday."

During the work week, Baldy lives in Camas in his sister's basement, sleeping on a couch. On his weekends, he takes the bus to Vancouver and stays with friends. He said he gives his sister rent money when he can afford it.

Baldy has three ex-wives and three adult children, one of which, his son, Eric, hasn't been in contact for years. Baldy also has two grandchildren, including a newborn. He proudly shows pictures of the baby to any customers who ask about his family.



Baldy has been in business in downtown Camas for five years. He hopes someday to expand his shop to two chairs.

One of his closest companions is his shop cockatiel, named Blondie, who serves as an especially helpful distraction when Baldy gets an antsy child in his chair.

## For the boys

That colorful bird, the Santa hat and the business name draws Teresa Bernard of Camas and her two sons, 7-year-old Jordan and 4-year-old Jakob, into the shop for the first time on this particular December Saturday.

Bernard said she looked over the three barber shops in the area and decided to try Baldy's because it looked like a place for boys.

With Jordan in the chair, Baldy lifts his Santa hat to show his clean-shaven head and asks, "So, you want a haircut like mine? ... I call it the reverse mohawk." The boy squirms and squeaks, "Noooo!" Baldy quickly smiles to let the boy know he's just joking, and Jordan relaxes.

Bernard said, "I usually cut their hair, but I mess it up pretty bad. So my husband said I couldn't do it anymore. ... We were looking for a place. And it looked fun in here with all of the guys."

Suddenly, Baldy is flush with customers. A father and his two children are waiting behind the Bernards. Two bald men walk by within minutes of each other, look in, then leave.

After he's done with the kids, giving all of them a sucker of their choice at the end, the shop just as suddenly is empty again. Baldy looks over a cinnamon roll that the Camas Deli had dropped off in the morning as a Christmas gift. That roll will turn out to be the only thing he eats during this work day, washed down with the pot of coffee.

The three barber shops are all closed Sun-

days and Mondays, then open similar hours the rest of the week, charging the same price per cut. Baldy's is the only one, though, that offers a discount.

"It's like going to Les Schwab and getting two tires but paying for four," he said. "A crew cut ain't really stylin' nothin' anyway."

About his barber training, Baldy says, "The biggest thing they taught us is sanitation and cleanliness." Yet he doesn't clean any of his tools during the day, even acknowledging that he should at some point. Instead, he picks up a book.

Bald guys come and go in spurts. Then another long lull in the afternoon. Baldy finally sweeps up the pile of brown and gray and blond hair that has been building at the base of his chair since morning. He gets out a spiral notebook and adds up the day's take for his tax records. He's just about to close early and head for the tavern across the street, when a young man with a full beard, the 14th customer of the day, barrels through the door with a bleached blonde in tow.

He asks, "Are we too late?"

Baldy smiles and invites him to have a seat. The man says he just wants the beard trimmed into a moustache. They chat briefly about Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Baldy laments that he used to own one, too. As the customer hustles to catch up with the blonde, who says she's going shopping, he slips Baldy \$5 for the trim.

That makes \$77 for the day, almost double what he made the rest of the week. That's reason to celebrate.

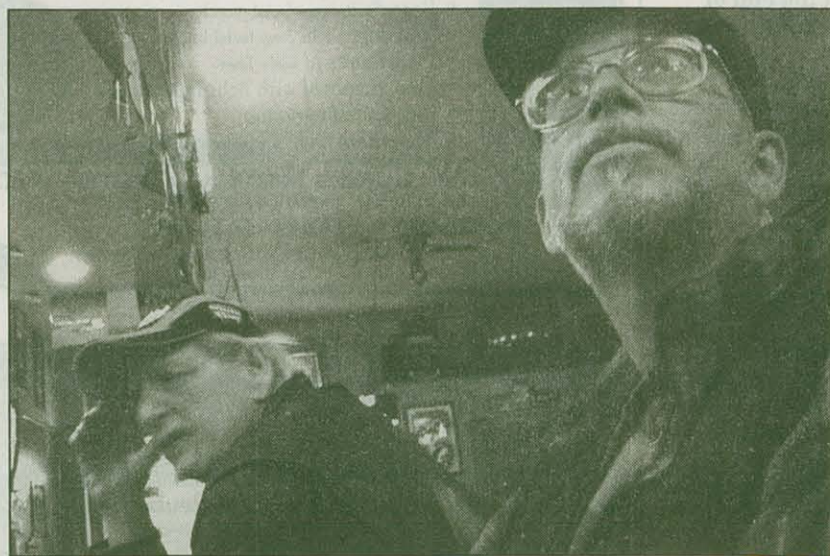
Baldy takes off his barber jacket to reveal a black leather vest underneath, complemented by a seashell necklace. He removes the Santa hat and replaces it with a ball cap that reads: "I'm too sexy for my hair. That's why I don't have any."

His plans to get a Miller Genuine Draft beer before he heads to Vancouver have changed with the fortune and the generous final tip. This day ends not with one beer, but two.

**"I usually cut their hair, but I mess it up pretty bad. So my husband said I couldn't do it anymore. ... We were looking for a place. And it looked fun in here with all of the guys."**

**Teresa Bernard of Camas**

Mother of 7-year-old Jordan and 4-year-old Jakob



After closing his shop on a recent Saturday, Baldy crosses the street to relax in the Mill tavern. He has a bus to Vancouver to catch but takes a few minutes to watch television and drink beer with friend Harold Collett, left.