

Living Today

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Don't judge a man by his overcoat

I never knew the man who roamed Columbia in a tattered gray overcoat, his head always cocked to one side.

But I wanted to.

I felt it would be an invasion of his privacy. He lived in his own special world, it seemed, and apparently responded to commands the rest of us never heard.

He often would stop on the sidewalk, turn around in a circle, then walk on down Main or Sumter Street in a shuffling gait. His hands would move erratically, as if to express what was churning inside him.

In the mid-1980s, he disappeared, leaving us all with the lingering question: Whatever happened to the man in the tattered gray overcoat?

Street person. I had forgotten about the man until J.W. Deloach at Columbia City Hall called last week and asked whether I remembered the homeless man.

How could I forget?

He was not a panhandler. But he was certainly a street person — his hair unkempt, his shoes scuffed. Oddly enough, he often visited the Richland County Public Library to peruse the financial pages of The Wall Street Journal.

But I never tapped him on the shoulder and asked: Mister, who are you? What makes you tick? (Listen. I can't even fathom myself sometimes. We all have our quirks, don't we?)

So I was grateful when Deloach unraveled the mystery.

The man, now deceased, was **Alton Chisolm Youmans**. He had worked for the Internal Revenue Service — a brilliant fellow who, quite simply, had dropped out of the rat race in middle age.

"I knew him when he was at Estill High and I was at Hampton-Varnville High School," Deloach recalled. "He was valedictorian of his class, and a decent basketball player."

Crazy patchwork. Deloach's telephone call reminded me how history is a patchwork of human experiences and odd links.

Youmans served in the Army after high school.

After dropping out of the rat race, however, he showed up at the Salvation Army, where Deloach, a member of the agency's advisory board, ran into him again.

Deloach helped Youmans get a permanent room at the agency. In verifying his identity for official record keeping, he also discovered that Youmans had a passbook account at a local bank that totaled more than \$80,000.

Youmans spent his last few years at Crafts-Farrow Hospital, where he died in the late 1980s.

Youmans' name surfaced last week, Deloach explained, when he ran across a legal ad in the Hampton County Guardian.

Youmans' estate was selling 137 acres of "prime property" in Hampton County, as well as a commercial lot with two buildings in the town of Luray.

The homeless man we all regarded as a pauper, who shared a chancy existence with drifters, winos, panhandlers and park loungers, was a man of substance.

"Things are not always what they seem, are they?" Deloach said.

Bill McDonald's column appears every Thursday and Sunday in The State. Call him at 771-8397 to tell him about interesting local people.