

David McGrath: Give me old things for the new year. Bring back paper maps and pay phones.



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A gas station attendant and a road map were once reliable sources for driving directions. (Camerique/ClassicStock / Getty Images)

Unlike many of my boomer brethren, I do not yearn for the good old days.

Instead, I embrace change and shed no tears for the disappearance of manual typewriters, four-barrel carburetors or Meister Brau beer. But there have been some extinctions for which there was no rhyme or reason, and whose losses, I believe, have diminished us in some way.

So, in the spirit of optimism and hope for the new year, I advocate a comeback of the following worthy staples of American life for 2023.

Maps: How I loved poring over a road map spread out on the hood of a car! Not just for the adventure and satisfaction of plotting my own route — instead of outsourcing it to Google or Bing — but also for the deeper knowledge I might absorb about a region's geography and culture that I cannot get from a digital screen.

Maps in newspapers, I miss even more. A story about a bridge collapse in Moldova or a bumper crop of grapes in Azerbaijan has more meaning and relevance for the reader with an accompanying map, which used to be supplied in a box or in a side panel of the story, showing a country's position on the globe and who its neighbors are.

Such maps have been eliminated to save space and cut costs. But what more valuable filler is there for a newspaper's column inches than graphic orientation and enhancement of its content?

Gumball machines: There was never a more magical introduction to the grown-up world of pleasure and commerce than those colorful gumball machines. Grouches removed them from most drugstores, gas stations, supermarkets and diners for reasons of health, security and profit. But also because they did not appreciate how this miraculous dispenser gives a kid his first feeling of control, independence and immediate gratification: Put in a penny and turn the knob, and a reward plops into your hand.

Granted, 1950s-era gumballs rotted your teeth. But bring them back with dentists' recommended Orbit gum and restore an important fabric of American childhood.

Wing vent windows in cars: When it was not hot enough for the air conditioning but the air in the car was stale, those small triangular vent windows were the answer. The driver and front passenger could adjust them at just the right angle for cooling and for fresh air, even if it was raining.

Today's "automatic climate control" function in modern vehicles never gets those features quite right. And the claim that it can accommodate differing preferences for the driver and passenger is a technological myth.

Gas station attendants: Speaking again of cars, while we do not have to leave their comfort and safety while completing a transaction at our bank, paying a toll, getting a COVID-19 shot or visiting a McDonald's or Starbucks, we still have to get out, regardless of how we are dressed, at a gas station.

Again, I evoke my childhood, when my six brothers and sisters and I were mesmerized, watching from the inside of our station wagon, as the attendant sprayed the windshield and wiped back and forth, back and forth, until we could clearly see his smile.

The difference today, if their jobs were resurrected, would likely be the presence of a tip jar next to the pump. But at least gas station attendants, unlike a lot of store clerks or baristas, would deserve them.

Pay phones: Am I the only one who dreads talking on the phone? I'd rather converse with someone in person or send them an email, or even a letter.

Which is why I held off on getting a cellphone for the longest time, compelled finally to purchase one when the last of the pay phones disappeared, and I had no other choice for emergencies.

So, yes, I'd like to see pay phones and their accompanying Superman booths returned. But they should include a digital screen and the capability to text, in which case I would gleefully fling my cellphone into the Chicago River. Just kidding: I'll recycle it at Best Buy.

Term papers: Students hate them. And teachers hate reading and grading them. Therefore, many schools have eliminated them, substituting blogs, oral reports, website creation, PowerPoint presentations and even podcasts.

But teaching students how to distinguish among logical arguments and fallacies, flimsy documents and reputable sources, facts versus "alternative facts," or truth and lies, all by applying Aristotelian principles of logic and Modern Language Association rules for research and documentation — all these skills are needed more today than ever before.

Your turn: What do you think should make a comeback: Milk trucks? Door-to-door Christmas carolers? "Seinfeld" (redux)? Float your proposal at the dinner table, or send me an email.

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