

It just makes you wonder

By Paul McNamara

Sept. 8, 1991

Have you ever wondered if all those things Andy Rooney is always wondering about really happened to him? Have you ever wondered if the stuff Andy is always finding in his junk drawer is really rattling around in his junk drawer? Have you ever wondered, in other words, if Andy Rooney makes up stuff?

If not, maybe you should.

Here's a paragraph from [a Rooney column](#) which was scheduled to run in newspapers nationwide – including this one – on Wednesday, Sept. 5:

“Driving to work the day after Labor Day, I passed a grade school just before 9 o'clock. Mothers were hand-holding their children to the door. My mind went into fast rewind. You don't forget your first school days.”

Enticing, yes. Evocative, yes. But true? That depends on your definition of true. Mr. Rooney and I are having trouble agreeing on that definition.

You see the column in question – release date: Sept. 5 – arrived here at the *News* via electronic transmission on Friday, Aug. 30.

That alone is not unusual; many syndicated writers file their columns days in advance. But go back and re-read Rooney's “Driving to work ...” paragraph.

Notice anything peculiar?

If you're stumped, here it is: How could Andy Rooney tell us what he saw while driving to work the day *after* Labor Day, when he was writing the column at least three days *before* Labor Day?

He can't, obviously. The man has innumerable abilities, but prescience is not among them.

What, then, is the explanation?

Newspaper writers want their words to be as fresh as bakery bread, fresher if possible. When deadlines (or holiday weekends) preclude the delivery of genuinely fresh words, a good writer finds creative ways to create at least the impression of freshness.

That's what Rooney was doing – fudging a little freshness, and coincidentally, leading Wednesday's newspaper readers to believe that he wrote his column on Tuesday. The scene he described happened, all right, it happened in virtually every school in America. But Andy Rooney didn't see it happen, at least not last Tuesday.

He stepped over the fudge line into the world of fabrication.

Rooney, as you might expect, does not see it that way.

When we talked about it on the phone he seemed genuinely mystified as to why anyone would question the propriety of what he had written.

The mothers hand-holding their children was “a generic sort of thing,” he said, the column “a conglomeration of things.”

The “driving to work” sentence didn’t state explicitly that “the day after Labor Day” was indeed Tuesday, Sept. 3, 1991, he noted, sounding serious but straining credulity beyond its limits.

Rooney was adamant that he had not committed any ethical breach. Had the school scene not been so “generic,” he said, he “would have been more careful about his choice of phrasing.”

My making an issue out of it was “tilting at windmills.” To buttress the point, he offered that “even Fred Friendly” would not question such a literary liberty. Friendly, for those who don’t know, is the former head of CBS News and one of the nation’s most acclaimed gurus of journalism ethics. Perhaps you’ve seen him on those PBS roundtable discussions where as moderator he does his best to twist and untwist the panelists’ ethical contortions. The man knows where the fudge line lies.

I called Fred Friendly, who is now director of Columbia University’s Seminars and Media and Society.

At first, he wanted no part of refereeing any sparring match involving Andy Rooney; he called the “60 Minutes” star “one of my dearest friends ... a suburb writer who I hired at CBS.”

Yes, but ... and I told Friendly what Rooney had told me, including the “even Fred Friendly” wouldn’t object part.

That got Mr. Friendly thinking, and talking, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

“Had you been in this office when you read (Rooney’s paragraph), you would have seen a raised eyebrow,” Friendly said.

“We all make mistakes,” he added, “... this one was of little consequence.”

Friendly’s right on both scores: We all stumble from time to time and Rooney’s misstep here is barely perceptible in the grand scheme of things.

But it’s not entirely without consequence. It has Fred Friendly raising an eyebrow ... and it has me wondering about Andy Rooney.