



PHOTOS BY MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Bagpiper George Steele and James Madison University student Tommy Cantwell collaborated to produce a device they call the Piper's Friend, which is intended to prevent spittle from collecting in a bagpipe.

IT MIGHT AMOUNT TO A BUCKET OF SPIT

# Local bagpiper creates breathtaking invention

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

George Steele doesn't want you to think he's blowing his own horn, but the Scotland native says he's come up with a device that will improve the lot of bagpipers worldwide.

"People have been playing bagpipes for centuries, but I'm the only one who thought of this," he said about the Piper's Friend, a device that catches moisture generated from blowing and is better, he claims, than what others have produced. "None of them have come near me."

The Spotsylvania County man is "quite a character," said Tommy Cantwell, a teenager who's worked with Steele on an invention he first thought about in the 1970s.

Steele is 80 and still teaching others how to drive, which is how he and Cantwell met almost two years ago. He's had several lifetimes of experience in those decades, from police work in Washington and Glasgow to driving almost every kind of machine with wheels: tractors and motorbikes, limousines and double-decker buses, and



This device might not change the world, but it could make piping a lot more bearable for musicians.

railroad cars while in the Army.

Saying he has a thick Scottish brogue is as much an understatement as suggesting that he rambles. A proper Scot response to his digressions might have been: "Noo jist haud on,"

which translates into "Now just hold it, slow down and take your time."

Instead, Steele touched on the Reformation in the 16th century, as well as the scoundrel who ran off with his wife, how he vowed he would "never again have an

addiction to wedding cake" and the way his fascination with miniskirts kept him from practicing the bagpipes.

He mentioned famous people he once chauffeured (Michael Jackson and Buzz Aldrin), the awful weather in Scotland and why he's glad to be working in America instead of twiddling his thumbs and being "bored, bored, bored."

"It's like a dog's breakfast what you're taking from me," he told a reporter, "because I'm getting so excited about how things are."

In other words, the interview was a confused mess.

## 'A GOODRASCAL'

One of 13 children, Steele has been piping since he was a young lad on the Isle of South Uist. Every home had a bagpipe in those days, and while working on a farm with his uncle, Steele found

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# COVID is making us all a little Claustrophobic

IT'S ANOTHER COVID Christmas!

This is the third Christmas in a row where COVID has been the main topic of conversation at the dinner table. Two years ago, it was COVID in China. Last year, it was COVID with a mask. And this year, it is COVID with a booster. We just can't seem to get rid of this stuff.

We've been through regular COVID, the delta strain of COVID and now the omicron variant. Who knows what we will have next year.

At least the Omicron variant is red, or so it is portrayed in the media. That's a good Christmas color. Maybe next year's mutation will be green and the following year those two strains will mutate to form something that resembles holly.

## TO THE POINT

Donnie Johnston



No, COVID is not funny, but we might as well laugh about it because crying is getting us nowhere. COVID, like influenza, is here to stay, especially when there are those who refuse vaccination and provide a secure host for the virus.

Enough about that. There is no sense in whipping up an argument on Christmas Day. You are either vaccinated or you're not. Your choice.

This is a rough time for Santa. Up there at the North Pole, he's pretty secluded. But visiting all those houses last night had to have put him at risk. There were reports

that the Jolly Old Elf would not come down chimneys that did not have a vaccination card attached to the flue, but that has not been verified—either by CNN or Fox News.

There were reports that some homes would not let Santa enter unless he showed proof of vaccination.

Other homeowners, however, reportedly would not let Santa in if he was vaccinated. They feared he was simply a government agent and part of an overall conspiracy.

Hopefully Santa kept his gloves on and burned them when he got home. No sense taking chances. And I'm sure he was tested upon his return.

Animals have gotten COVID, so reports of



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**We hope Santa Claus brought you good health and exactly what you wanted and needed this Christmas.**

flying reindeer wearing masks may not have been exaggerated. We've all got to be safe.

There are supposed to be two NFL and several NBA games on TV today, but given the spread of the virus recently nothing is certain. One of the NFL

games involves Green Bay and I hope Aaron Rodgers is now fully vaccinated and isn't contagious. I'd hate to catch COVID from the TV set.

Hopefully all the family gatherings won't perpetuate the pandemic as experts say it likely will.

My family—small grandchildren and all—are fully vaccinated (the adults have boosters) so I feel relatively safe. Of course, you never know. Still, I trust the vaccine.

In all sincerity, I hope everyone is having a good Christmas. The virus has made the season a little rougher, but hopefully we will all get through it.

I hope Santa, masked or not, brought you exactly what you wanted and needed. Good health would be the greatest gift in these uncertain times.

So clean up the strewn wrapping paper, eat hearty and enjoy being with family on this fine 60-degree day.

Merry Christmas to everyone.

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# City noise ordinance is causing a ruckus

BY TAFT COGHILL JR.  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Business owners in downtown Fredericksburg aren't being quiet about a proposed noise ordinance scheduled for a City Council vote this month.

The owner of Billiken's Smokehouse at the Chimneys has circulated an online petition that has been signed by more than 1,400 people encouraging the City Council not to go for-

ward with the downtown ordinance.

A total of 16 letters—all taking a strong stance against the ordinance—were read at the City Council meeting last week.

“You can't keep regulating and regulating and regulating, because then people like me are gone,” said Gregory Shalawylo, the owner of Billiken's Smokehouse restaurant on Caroline Street. “And then what do you have?”

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Greg Shalawylo worries that the proposed noise ordinance would hurt his downtown restaurant, which offers live music outdoors.