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Let fingers spot-check society in Yellow Pages

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Can it be February already? February in an even-numbered year? That means, of course, it's time for my Biennial Review of the Yellow Pages, that every-other-yearly look at the true state of the legal profession, the harlot profession and all those lesser-known professions too obscure to remember except when flipping through the phone book.

The thing itself--and I'm referring to the Ameritech Chicago Yellow Pages, since there are now others, God knows why--has shrunk to 1,870 pages, down from 1,917 pages two years ago.

But not to worry. Lawyers are making a comeback: 167 orange-edged pages of "Lawyers you can trust," up from from 145 pages two years ago. Not quite to the go-go 1998 level of 178 pages.

Times are harder, but the lawyers show the same sense of decorum and restraint befitting their profession, from personal injury firm Kass & Moses' tasteful phone number ("1-773-HURTING") to Kurt A. Muller's copyrighted slogan, "For the LAST word on SETTLEMENT, get the FIRST name in DIVORCE."

My favorite is **Jonathan Rosenfeld's** ad, featuring his (I assume) grinning face at the center of a dollar bill-styled layout and the motto "Get the CASH You Deserve!"

Louis B. Brandeis couldn't have said it better.

On to hookers. Previously, escort services have shown a steady march: from seven pages in 1994 to 21 in 1996, then 48 pages in 1998- at which the Yellow Pages, quailing under such exponential growth which seemed to point toward the entire phone book being taken up with pandering in short order, eliminated the category.

Now ESCORTS are back, with a mid-'90s eight pages, joined by 11 pages of ENTERTAINMENT--ADULT (including, to my delight, several examples of the classic come-on, "Girls, Girls, Girls") plus six pages of MASSAGE (including, I should note, a few legit therapists no doubt ashamed to be among "Seka's Sensational Massage" and "Angela's Amazing Touch.")

It adds up to 25 pages of commercial romance, less than half the 1998 zenith. Perhaps society's improving.

Dot.coms might be dying, but the blue-edged INTERNET section boasted 16 pages, up from nine pages in 2000 and a mere six pages in 1998 (compared to zero pages of INTERNET listings in 1996).

Despite this gain for technology, the Yellow Pages, as always, remain a refuge for quaint anachronism.

Music once more is listed, not under COMPACT DISCS but under RECORDS. There are headings for DISCOTHEQUES and CORSETS and a few that are pure mysteries, such as a separate listing for CHILI CON CARNE. Two companies are listed under PHILOSOPHERS, and pet waste removal is offered by two more, one called "Poop Busters," the other, "Have Doggie, We'll Do."

Some listings seem to suggest a new way of life. My eyes couldn't sweep over "Nannies of Nebraska" without imagining some apple-cheeked, corn-fed farm lass in a faded blue workshirt arriving on the Greyhound from Omaha and yanking my riotous household in line.

But alas, it must be a mere illusion.

In the Yellow Pages, the past lives. Variety stores might be as antique as variety shows, but there are 89 of them here, from Amazing Savings to--my God!--a pair of F. W. Woolworth stores, listed despite the chain's going bankrupt nearly five years ago. (I phoned them, both hoping and afraid that some gum-snapping waitress would pick up at the luncheonette counter, where my mother and my 6-year-old self would be sitting eating grilled cheese sandwiches and Cokes in cylindrical paper cups in metal holders. But the numbers just rang and rang).

Woolworth's is here, but FEATHERS are gone--there was a company dealing them, but no more. Balsa wood retailers are gone, too. Puppets, however, are holding their own--a steady seven, the same as in 2000 and only one less than in 1994.

That's the thing with the phone book. Every line tells a story.

Now I don't know beans about, say, the people at the American Trophy & Award Co. Inc. ("CUSTOM PLAQUES AND ALL TYPES OF ENGRAVING"), but I bet there's a story there, as well as at the Ability Rockroad Co. ("Stone Grading*Seal Coat*Stripping") and Lionel G. Eubanks, Naval Architect."

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