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The travails of a U.S. census taker

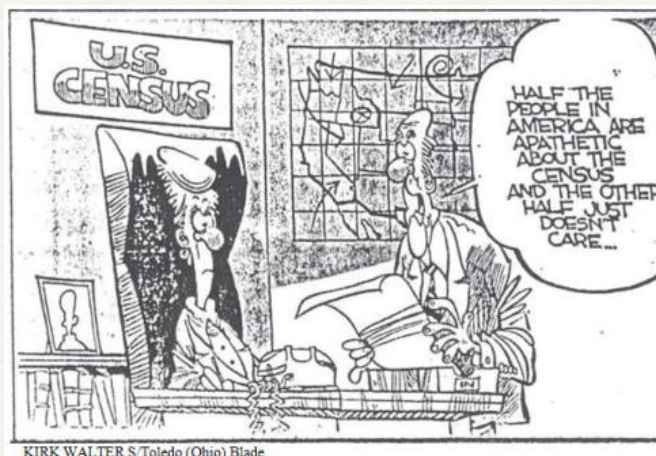
I am working as a census taker. My job is to go around door to door and find people who still need to fill out their census forms, even at this late date. I have a list of names of people who didn't fill them out. I get my information from the same place Santa Claus gets his naughty list. Both of us are sworn to secrecy, so that's all I can say about our sources.

One thing I'm finding out is that there are a lot of people out there who don't like the government. Another thing they don't like is filling out forms. You get three guesses how they feel about filling out forms that came from the government. There's something about the whole operation that just peeves the heck out of these people.

Some folks really get to feeling peevish when anybody brings up the subject of the government. They start muttering things about taxes and idiots in office, and all that kind of good cheer that you usually hear around tax season. Come to think of it, the census comes right at tax season. Maybe this is why some people get that wild look in their eyes when I mention I am working for the federal government.

This is the end of an incredibly gigantic operation. The maps have been made, the workers have been trained, and millions of individual forms have been mailed out. Some even got mailed back. I am now on the clean-up crew, getting the last of the stragglers. Every single household in the United States has to be accounted for. There's no point in trying to hide behind the garage. We've been trained to look back there.

I have a badge that I try to keep it in plain sight so people will know I am some kind of official. For some reason, most murderers don't wear badges. That's why people feel safe opening the door. Once the door is open, I tell them who I am, what I'm up to, and ask if they will please cooperate and fill out their form.



My job is to get as much information as I can through a combination of good will, calls to patriotism and old-fashioned begging.

One thing I've noticed is that you can't judge a person by his cover. I can't tell by looking at a house what the people inside are going to be like. People are just people, and I'm meeting all kinds. I don't have a clue which kind is going to be standing there until the door opens and I meet them face to face.

There is one general rule. It seems that whenever there is a couple, it's usually easier to deal with the female. The men tend to lean toward the grouchy, suspicious, don't-bother-me style of functioning. I don't know if it's the genes or the upbringing, but the women tend to be more reasonable about the whole thing.

Also, there are dogs. Now I see what the mail carriers complain about. One German shepherd had me pinned against a house. I had to back over to my car, holding my census book in his face, yelling stern words at him all the way. He was really mean. He chased my car right out onto the highway, trying to bite the tires off my car. He might have done it if I would have given him another minute or two. I'm telling you, it's no joke out there.

How did I get this job? First I took a test where you fill in the circle with a pencil, and the computer reads the answer and tells you whether you are smart or dumb. I guess the computer must have liked me, because I got the job.

Then there is the training. We were taught the whole job in three days flat. We had to learn how to do everything the government's way. No matter what happens, there is always a form to fill out.

Say I want to take a break on the job and have some orange juice. First I have to fill out a B-301 form, the one that says "Taking a Break" at the top. Under the "Reason" section, I circle "orange juice." If I circle "potato chips" by mistake, I have to throw it out and start another one.

Then I sign it and my boss signs it, and he sends it off to Kansas City, where some guy who already has a gigantic headache puts it into the computer. After that, I'm not sure what happens. I think it goes into some kind of cosmic information pool way up in the sky. At least that's what I've heard.

So, I have been trained, deputized, and now I'm on the job, beseeching people to please fill out their form.

Most people are friendly. Once they realize who I am and what I'm up to, they will go out of their way to help me out.

Some people have to fill out the dreaded "long form." Just about everything you can think of is covered, including what size underwear each person in the household wears. Not only size, but also which brand and color. If it's different colors on different days, they have to explain that. Additional sheets can be attached as necessary.

At the end, everybody breathes a sigh of relief. It is over for another 10 years. The census comes only once a decade. It is kind of like a comet, except that you don't have to hire helpers to run a comet, dogs can't bite it and if you don't want to look at the comet, you don't have to.

The census is a good thing. We can't have a representative democracy unless we know how many people are out there and where they are living. So, thanks a lot for all your help, and a big thank you in advance for keeping your poochie securely tied to an immovable object. See you in 10 years!