

The Sign

January 23, 2019

A couple of pictures from a long-ignored box of family memorabilia recently triggered the memories of this event which happened over sixty years ago. A better title might be “A” Sign, for it surely was a sign that my young life would soon take a sudden, and very sharp, turn. The time is winter 1956, and the place is Oconee County South Carolina near the town of Walhalla, a few miles west of Clemson. Some background seems in order.

Because of World War II my formative years in Arlington, VA were very much unsupervised. Dad was away in the Army and Mom was working six, often seven, days a week for what later became NSA. All the families on our block were like this and us kids pretty much raised ourselves. It gave you a sense of independence and bravado which was good, but there were downsides. I’ve had an FBI rap sheet since the age of eight – an unfortunate incident involving a bloody life-threatening note intended for another kid but stuck on the wrong door with mother’s ice pick (Yes, Virginia, there really is a permanent record because this came up 30+ years later when I got a higher security clearance). And it took me four years to get through high school because I was expelled a month before graduation in my first senior year. Fortunately, no one was injured by the cherry bomb in the cafeteria, but Dick Byrd’s soup bowl was demolished right there on his tray. And there had been some other things, so you can well imagine how happy my parents were to finally put me on that train.

In 1955 the Town of Clemson was a world away from Arlington. It was maybe three blocks long by two blocks wide, and the college was about all there was. Freshmen were not allowed cars, and absolutely no girls would dare be seen with a freshman. These were the things that I was interested in. All you could do was go to class and do homework, and these were the things that I was not very interested in. But I squeaked through, and life got better the second year. Frank Clawson showed up with a car giving us some mobility, which was good on the weekend when it seemed that everyone who lived within 100 miles of the campus went home.

It was an early December Sunday evening when four of us and some beers from the Esso Club, which back then really was a gas station with semi-legal beer in the Coke cooler, set out for Walhalla in search of the cave where they aged the famous Clemson Blue Cheese. Dad had lived in Walhalla during his teen years - I had been there and sort of knew where the cave was. But we never found it that night, eventually ending up in the Oconee State Forest, which was closed for the season. There in the parking lot, was a cool sign that read Police Car Parking Only. We decided that it would make a great souvenir and were busily uprooting it when it became evident that the park wasn’t quite as closed as we thought. Enter the Forest Ranger in full Code 4 response mode, with screaming siren and flashing lights. This was J. W. Ray, and he was outraged that we were desecrating “his park”. He was a very big man with a very big badge and a very big gun, and we were scared s-less. He took us to Headquarters, which was also his house, and proceeded to lecture. He would work himself into a froth and pick up the phone to call the Sheriff, but Mrs. Ray would pop out of the bedroom in her pajamas and calm him down. We went through this a couple of times and eventually, with her help, worked out a deal whereby we would come back that following Saturday, fix the sign, and also rake leaves. And, we were to rake leaves every Saturday for the next several months. He would come to Clemson personally if we didn’t appear, and he made us show our ID. When he got to mine a slow grin came on. “Boy, you any kin to Enoch Cudd?” Well, gee whiz, I’m a Jr. – what could I say. Incredibly he had been my father’s close friend in High School and nothing would do but to call him right then and there, and he did. It was close on to midnight and it took Dad a few minutes to figure out who he was talking to - I doubt they had spoken

since he left Walhalla around 1919. “Got your boy here, Enoch, he’s a hell raiser just like you, yadda, yadda, yadda.”

But that was to be the very last phone call that Dad ever got from the cops. When I went home at semester’s end with a less than stellar grade report Dad had had enough. He told me to find a job, another place to live, and another table to eat at. So, I did, and it all worked out for the better - marriage, kids, degree, and 36 great years at Martin. And I learned, and have continued to learn, that often life’s most valuable lessons come from outside the classroom.