They Were My Friends for Years, Trump Tore Us Apart

**By Art Culllen**

I miss my friends. We lost one another somewhere along the way, through the pandemic and politics of the last few years, old boys who had known one another since Little League and caught boatloads of walleyes together on Storm Lake.

We gathered around a pool table a couple of times a week for many years to see where the fish were biting, to learn who was putting up that building on the edge of town and to exaggerate the exploits of days gone by. Our political discussions were limited to Hawkeyes (University of Iowa) versus Cyclones (Iowa State) football or how city hall doesn’t know siccum. There were complaints that Barack Obama wanted to take our guns. And that those idlers ought to get a job and quit complaining. And that a little guy couldn’t compete in the trades anymore when the big outfit hired undocumented labor to underbid them on local jobs.

But it was mainly jokes shouted over classic rock. If things got too heavy, our resident sage, Rooster, would commandeer the discussion and suck all the oxygen from the room with a rant about how most of the world’s problems could be solved or at least avoided if weed were legal.

Not even Rooster could talk over Donald Trump. A would-be tyrant holed up at a Florida golf course with a bunch of sycophants changed the conversation in our metal shed Is walls could not ward off the bombardment of propaganda, lies and false fears fostered by a half century of justifiable frustration wrought by consolidation, decline and loss.

The pandemic kept us away. I was lonely. I visited Rooster at his little bachelor shack and watched “Wagon Train” reruns. He wasn’t feeling the best. We got back to shooting pool, though it wasn’t long before Rooster laid down his guns and died, Cancer got him fast. It should have shaken us straight, but hell sort of broke loose. Arguments started over vaccines and masks and Mr. Trump. The rodeo clown was no longer there to distract the raging bull set loose by the bombardment.

So, I quit shooting.

One of my old friends, or shall I say acquaintance, recently said on Facebook that I lacked integrity after I posted an editorial from our newspaper complaining about Mr. Trump’s contempt for the democratic process and rule of law. I’ve been a community newspaper editor for decades and no stranger to controversy, having angered the agribusiness gods and endured their reprobation, but I have to say that barb stuck. Our mothers were good friends. They would not have spoken that way about each other, at least in public.

We’re old enough for Social Security and to recall scooping the loop in a jacked-up Chevelle waiting for “Beaker Street” to beam over the AM airwave from Little Rock, Ark. Or how you used to bring your shotgun to Storm Lake High School and leave it in your locker so you could bag a pheasant in a freshly picked cornfield after school. Rush Limbaugh took over AM, and the shotgun gave way to the assault rifle.

You would think we could see our difference. We can’t. We’ve been programmed by nonstop propaganda, especially those of us in Iowa besieged by presidential campaigns and the wedge issues they drill home. Instead of trying to hash thing out, I just quit trying. My bad. I got tired.

Small-town hacks learn who their friends are. We publish uncomfortable facts of public interest and opinions that often go against the grain. Businesses stopped advertising because you wrote about their lawsuit. That I get. It’s a hazard of the occupation that I regret every day. You pledge to do better even when you have done nothing wrong.

The ad hominem attacks have become the norm, especially since Mr. Trump took center stage and refused to exit. Event from Iowa Nice to Iowa Nasty. We’re stuck there whether Mr. Trump leaves of hangs around. That’s my lament.

You can’t just talk about the weather anymore, or how to smoke a trout, or compliment Solo on his pickled Polish sausage. You make new friends, but they don’t necessarily replace the ones you lost right in your hometown. I text my buddy in New York nearly every day, but I can’t shoot pool with him. I still shoot pool with Solo, our retired pressman, in the bubble of our former pressroom. He kind of liked Representation Steve King at one time because took on the Establishment. I differed. We sweated a lot together, slinging ink, even bleeding a little, for the truth at 15,000 impressions per hour. That’s worth more than Steve King.

I know where I live. Northwest Iowa is a frozen slice of Texas, one of the most conservative places in the country. I guess I am what you call woke because I don’t think immigrants are the problem; I think income – lack of it—is the problem. All this talk about bathroom bills and book bans is one giant distraction from how global corporations have stolen our franchise. I am not the enemy of the people, due – we were in Cub Scouts together.

Rooster would have pointed that out in an outrageous way, and he would have ridiculed us all for being that stupid and blind. We would have laughed and cracked another cold one and grabbed some more of that trout. Those were the days.